

ALMOST A KISS

"What's so funny?" he asked, seeing her smile.

She could feel the blush rising in her cheeks. "Nothing really."

"There is. You're thinking something funny."

His amazing turquoise eyes searched her face. A shock of dark red hair drooped over his forehead. She could touch her hand to his cheek . . . "I'd better say good night," she said.

He looked into her eyes. "You want to touch me."

She clenched her fist. "No."

He smiled, a sweet smile. "Yes you do. You want to touch me. Go ahead. I promise I won't bite."

She should go to her room, she thought, and shut the door and push the chair under the doorknob.

"Go ahead," he whispered. "This is your weekend for firsts."

She touched his cheek. Trembling, she trailed her fingertips down into the faint roughness of his beard.

He sighed, then put his big hand over hers and curved her palm around his mouth. His lips moved in the heart of her hand.

She gasped and jerked back as if she had touched fire.

He dropped his hand and held the door open for her. "Go to bed, Duchess," he said softly. "And when you sleep, dream about me."

DISCOVER DEANA JAMES!

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DEANA
JAMES
DUGHERS



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*For Keith Tucker—
artist, scholar, and gentleman
and my daughter's loving husband,
in appreciation and celebration of all you are*

Chapter One

The Rescuers

Someone knocked softly on the satin-covered board beside her cheek.

Bessie froze. She gulped back the tears clogging her throat and tried to hold her breath. Her fists, bruised from pounding on the insides of the box, throbbed. Her heart's blood pounded in her ears.

Had she heard the sound? Or only imagined it?

"Don't stop! For God's sake! Make more noise!" a voice hissed somewhere behind and beneath her.

A wild hope rose in her heart. Redoubling her efforts, she pounded and kicked her feet. "Help! Help! Let me out! Let me out! Please Sweet Jesus, save me!"

Leather slapped the wood inches above her face. "Shut yer yap! Nobody's gonna pay y' no mind."

In the smothering darkness Bessie blinked at the unmistakable whap of a coachwhip. Shocked, confused, she went still. Her eyes stung as tears leaked from their corners.

"Scream!" the nearer voice, a woman's voice, commanded. "Don't stop! Scream, you ninny!"

Sucking foul air into her lungs, Bessie expelled it with all the force she was capable of. A terrible cry ripped out of her throat.

Above and behind her, she heard a faint screeching. Light—not really light but a lightening—penetrated the smothering blackness. It revealed the lid of the box, only inches from her nose. Another shard of icy horror lanced through her. Then cool fresh air struck the top of her head.

Rescue! She sucked the air into her lungs and screamed again and again. Heedless of the skin on her hands and toes, she kicked and pounded on the top and sides of the box.

The whip rapped the coffin box once more. From above her somewhere near her feet, she could hear the driver complain to someone else. "If she don't shut 'er yap, I'm gonna pitch 'er in th' ditch."

"She'll wear 'erself out in a minute," came a gruff reply.

At that instant a hand touched her shoulder.

Bessie caught it in a death grip. It was small. Even in her terror, she noticed how small the hand was.

"Ease out now, but be quiet," the voice whispered.

Bessie moaned softly as the hand tugged itself out of her grasp. The horses trotted on. The rough roadbed jolted the box wagon from side to side. Its wheels creaked.

"Didn't I tell ye?" the second voice bragged to the first.

Praying silently, Bessie began to push herself out through the end of the coffin. Cautiously, she peeped over the edge. Through a rectangle high up at the top of the box, she could see the driver's silhouette, black against black, sprinkled with stars. *What if he turned and saw her!*

"Come on," the voice urged. "Hurry!"

Bessie put out her hand to find an obstacle, the back of the wagon.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

The door creaked as it swung open. Bessie twisted on her rear and swung her legs over the side. Light revealed another woman next to her, doing the same thing.

"What in blazes?"

Bessie jumped. Her bare feet hit the road. An ankle turned, she staggered. The woman next to her fell to her knees. The wagon door creaked noisily.

“ ’Ere now. Git back ’ere!”

Boots hit the ground with a resonating thud. The slight figure of their rescuer jumped down beside them. At first Bessie thought a young man had freed her. A soft cap was pulled down low over the eyes. A frock coat swung round the trousered thighs. Then a very feminine voice called, “This way. Follow me. Run!”

“Whoa-up!”

As the driver pulled back on the traces, the off horse neighed shrilly and reared.

“Billy-be-damned!”

The near horse lunged forward, whinnying, as the driver wrestled with the lines; then the team took flight. The headlong rush toppled the driver off the box.

“What in ’ell . . .” The guard pulled a pistol from his belt. Clinging to the pitching seat, he turned halfway around and fired into the roadbed behind him. The bullet sped harmlessly away.

The team stretched out at a lumbering gallop, bits in their teeth, dragging the driver yelling and cursing for a hundred yards before he could free himself from the lines.

Bessie dashed back down the road. Rocks and clods of dirt cut into her bare feet. She could not keep up with her rescuer. A hundred yards she ran, panting and stumbling in the dark. Behind them, hoofbeats slowed. The voices of the two men could be heard cursing. A farm girl born and bred, Bessie could picture them halting the team, turning them.

Just as the fleeing women came to a bend in the road, Bessie threw a fearful glance over her shoulder. A rut turned her ankle. She fell sprawling, crying out in despair. She would be left.

“Get up. It’s just a step farther.” A strong hand dropped to Bessie’s shoulder. Her rescuer had come back for her.

Ahead, the black bulk of a coach loomed across the road.

The rescuer left her to swing the door open. “Jump in.”

The other woman hurled herself into its cab.

“Hurry.”

Scrambling to her feet, Bessie flung herself into the darkness.

Velvet squabs cushioned her. She pushed herself tightly into one corner, her ankle throbbing.

The rescuer poised in the door. "Ready, Peter?"

"Ready, ma'am."

"Here comes Bert."

Peter clicked his teeth and called to the horses. Smoothly the coach turned. Coming up on the left at a dead run, Bert caught the edge of the seat. Without using the long step, he swung up and scrambled in.

"Whip 'em up, boys!"

The door snapped shut and Peter sprang the team. The passengers all were occupied for the next few miles hanging on to the straps and bracing themselves to keep from being flung about. The darkness and the speed made picking a smooth road impossible. The coach swayed violently, jounced over ruts, and careened around curves.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour they continued at that pace, until even the strongest team could stand no more.

"We're slowing," the cultured voice spoke out of the darkness.

"Where you takin' us?" the girl who had been in the coffin next to Bessie demanded.

"Back to London," came the soft reply. "From there you're free to go wherever you want."

Bessie's eyes were beginning to be accustomed to the dimness. She stared at the pale oval, trying to discern features. She did not want to be rude or ungrateful, but her fears were reasserting themselves. "Who're you?"

A small silence.

"She's Duchess." Both young women peered into the farthest corner of the coach. They had not noticed the child, a little girl, who sat there.

"Duchess?" Bessie tore her eyes away from the speaker, so unexpected in this night of surprises and alarms. "Oh, ma'am. Your Grace."

"A duchess? Not likely." Bessie's companion scoffed. "What's a duchess doin' out here on the road at night, I'd like t' know?"

"We're rescuers," the little girl explained proudly. "We rescue girls in trouble."

The coach slowed perceptibly as the horses settled to a steady pace. Bessie rubbed her hands over her skinned knees. She shivered in her only garment, the thin nightgown. Her teeth began to chatter. Still she managed to speak. "Oh, ma'am, God bless you. You're an angel. I was that scared. Where were they takin' us?"

The other woman snorted. "Ain't y' figured that out yet?"

"No," Bessie said humbly.

"I knew soon as I came to. Shouldn't 've let that bastard stand me t' that last drink."

"No, you really shouldn't," Duchess agreed. The coach was moving at a good clip now. The fine horses, grain-fed Cleveland bays, were tooling off the miles at a rolling gallop.

Bessie's heartbeat began to return to normal. She lifted her head. "I didn't drink with anybody. I was just walkin' along, mindin' my own business. Someone threw a sack over my head. It smelt funny."

"Probably chloroform," came the quiet voice.

"Coo. Jus' like they used on ol' Queen Vic 'erself. Oughta make y' feel better." Sarcasm dripped from the other woman's voice.

Bessie shook her head at the lack of gratitude. As the coach gave a lurch, the farm girl swallowed convulsively. She was desperately hungry. Huddled in a knot of misery, she wondered how long she had been unconscious. Outside the window the darkness was impenetrable.

"W-where were they takin' us?" Bessie asked again.

"I can't say for certain," Duchess told her. "But I suspect you were on your way to Rotterdam."

"Rotter d-dam!" Bessie stumbled over the word. "I—I don't know . . ."

The other woman snorted again. "Gawd! Featherheaded ninny! No wonder—"

"If you know so much," Duchess interrupted, "you should know who your drinking companions are."

The one who had spoken delivered a loud grunt. She crossed one leg over the other and turned her shoulder to her rescuers.

"Wi-will they be comin' after us?" Bessie asked.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. They may not consider the two of you worth the trouble. If we can get you away, then you can go back home. Would you like to go back home?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. If I can only get home to my mama and papa." Bessie began to snifle. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her nightgown.

"Don't cry," the young rescuer advised, placing a warm little hand on Bessie's knee. "Duchess will see you home safe."

"Why don't we all settle down and close our eyes now that the excitement is over?" On the seat opposite the two women, Duchess put her arm across Pansy Bowyer's shoulders and tipped the little girl back against her. Pan tucked her feet up on the seat and laid her head in Duchess's lap.

The coach rocked on through the night, its passengers wrapped in their own thoughts and dreams.

The drawing room of Mrs. Avory Shires's townhouse seemed like a haven to Duchess. She allowed herself to lean back in the chair as her "Saint" Peter brought in the tea service.

Avory regarded her guest with a critical eye. "You're working too hard, my girl. Too many sleepless nights for you. They show in your face."

Surprised by the blunt speaking, Duchess shifted up in the prescribed manner to the edge of her chair.

"Don't bother with that nonsense." Her hostess waved her back. "Relax. You mustn't preserve all that corseted decorum here." She smiled up at her butler as he set the silver service in front of her.

An answering smile contorted his blunt, craggy face, making it only slightly less threatening than at its most serious. Peter was a former pugilist whom Mrs. Shires had engaged to guard her door when her marches and speeches for woman's suffrage made her the target of unpleasant hecklers. Despite their very different backgrounds, the daughter, widow, and mother of

peers and the hodcarrier's son had developed a strong bond of understanding.

The hostess poured tea and passed the cup to Duchess. "From what I hear, your trip was successful as usual."

"Yes." Duchess sighed.

Avory regarded her guest over the gold rims of her amber-tinted spectacles. "But you're not pleased?"

Duchess set the tea down untouched. "We rescued two girls. Just two. So few for such a lot of effort. Probably two dozen more were spirited out of London last night bound for brothels and slave markets."

"My dear, you mustn't fault yourself. You're doing everything you can."

"I couldn't do as much as I do without your carriage and your men," Duchess said glumly.

"And I'm all too glad to help you," Avory assured her. "Although—"

Duchess looked her straight in the eye. "Although you think I'm wasting my time."

Avory lifted her shoulders in a faint shrug. "Saving even one girl from such a terrible fate is never a waste of time. I only deplore the toll your efforts take on you."

"I'm perfectly all right—"

Avory did not pause. "You are a young girl of good family—"

"You know very well—" Duchess began angrily.

"I know what I know. You are a young girl of good family. You should be taking your proper place in society. You should be enjoying the world to which you were born. You should be meeting and getting to know young men and young women from whom you will select your friends and your husband." Avory's voice conveyed her certainty and her concern.

Duchess looked around her at her hostess's cozy nest. She sat on a well-sprung sofa, velvet cushions at her back. Behind and arching over her was a veritable forest of greenery made up of dwarf palms and iron plants. A table beside her held an even dozen family photographs in silver frames. The comfort and warmth of her surroundings tugged at Duchess's soul, but

she sadly shook her head. "Mrs. Shires, I have no wish to enter society. You know that."

The older woman took a sip of her tea before adding a half teaspoon more of sugar. She stirred it reflectively. "You have called me Avory for six months, my dear. I didn't mean to distress you, but I think you are feeling the futility of what you are trying to do. Believe me when I say that the way to change society is from within." She leaned forward. "Look at me."

Obligingly, her guest raised her head. Avory's faded blue eyes were loving. "If you were my daughter, I would tell you the very same thing. The words of outsiders are very rarely listened to. Since they are outsiders, they must be wrong. Insiders, on the other hand, are given credence and polite hearing. Why? Because they are insiders."

"You couldn't get votes for women," Duchess pointed out.

"We haven't yet," Avory corrected gently. "But we will. I insist that you allow me to sponsor you to go about in society."

Duchess hesitated. Avory's offer was tempting. Although much had changed from what it had been, her life outside was lonely. "I won't take my father's name," she insisted as she capitulated. "I absolutely refuse to have anything to do with him."

Avory smiled beatifically. "No need to do that although you may regret it later. We'll start with a tea. No, I have the very thing. The Turner Retrospective at the Tate Gallery. Tomorrow evening. One of the Royal Dukes, I forget which one, is attending. It will be your first opportunity to see and be seen."

Duchess smiled. "I don't think anyone will notice me with a Royal Duke and a collection of Turners."

"Of course, they will. Everyone who's attending will have seen everything, including the Duke. They'll be looking for new faces."

"They won't see mine."

"Of course, they will, my dear." Once begun on a project Avory Shires was unstoppable. "They'll see a beautiful face and hear a fascinating new name."

Duchess's head snapped up. "I have no name."

"Then we'll give you one." The old woman smiled. "I have it. The name that dreadful old man called you that awful night. Evelyn."

"I don't think—"

"An air of mystery, yet perfectly unexceptionable. Miss Evelyn Smythe."

The suite of offices belonging to Continental Trading were in all ways unremarkable. Oak floors were oiled to keep down dust. Drab, scarred hutches overflowed with ledgers and pieces of paper covered with figures. Clerks with spectacles huddled behind these hutches transferring numbers from one to the other by the dim light through grimy windows looking out onto the waterfront.

The president of the company, Monro Taine, was just as unremarkable. While his station was a desk from which he glowered, it was merely a desk. No elegant product of a French cabinetmaker. No Brussels carpet lay beneath his feet. No niceties as one might expect as the by-products of trade with the continent.

He glowered at the man who had brought him the news. One of his cargos had been waylaid. The fact that he had sustained no major loss and that ten other like cargos had sailed away on the morning tide to The Hague and Rotterdam comforted him not at all.

"A woman, you say?" he hissed. His thin eyelids drooped over gray eyes so pale that they disappeared into the whites. "Duchess." His breath slid out between thin lips. One skeletal hand held a cigar aloft. His sharp, inch-long fingernails drummed once, then again on the desk top.

"We're not for sure that she's the one." The guard shifted uneasily. "The one who got the girls was wearing pants, but he was short. Real short. I figured . . ." He glanced at the omnipresent Egyptian, an obsidian obelisk topped by a scarlet fez, never far from Taine's side. "I figured from what I've heard about her . . ."

"It's her all right. Nobody else would cut into a man's business like that." Taine dismissed him with a wave of his hand, scattering cigar ashes. "Get on with you."

The guard and driver slunk out.

"Enough is enough," Taine growled when the Egyptian had closed the door behind the two. "The bitch is cutting into business. She's stealing the goods. No goods. No profits. My profits."

The Egyptian nodded. The tassel on his fez brushed his swarthy cheek.

Taine pulled a drawer open far enough to raise the lid of a metal box. The dim light revealed money—paper notes of many denominations, silver coins of various sizes and shapes, and here and there the glint of gold. He selected several pound notes and smoothed them out on the desk top. "Find her. Only a little here and there should do the trick. And when you do, we'll teach her a sharp lesson. Every bitch needs a lesson now and then."

Duchess had assumed the disguise of a ragpicker. Pan tripped along beside her, a miniature edition. Both were clothed from head to toe in layers of clothing—hats with brims pulled down around their ears and knotted beneath their throats and numbers of gray, loose-fitting garments that disguised not just their figures but their age and condition as well. Heads down, they moved unhurriedly along the Soho street looking like beggars that no man would find profit or pleasure in bothering.

They came to a corner and paused beneath the lamppost.

Out of the fog came the distorted sounds of a coach rumbling, creaking. Horses galloped, iron wheels clanged against stone.

"There's somebody coming," Pan observed, looking in the direction of the sounds. "They're coming awfully fast."

"Idiots." Duchess condemned them nervously. She tightened her grip on Pan's hand. "In this fog—"

"Eee-haw!"

A scream like none other rang through the London night. Pan flung herself against Duchess and the two sprang back from the curb. The horses bore down upon them, mud and water splashing from beneath their hooves.

Pan let out a shrill scream.

Chapter Two

The Devil's Palace

"Look out, Rowdy! You're fixing to kill somebody."

Guillermo Sandoval gripped his cousin's arm and pointed to the figures in the pool of light.

Rowdy wrapped the reins around his wrists and pulled with all his might. Planting his boot on the brake, he bore down with all his weight. The pair riding on top of the berlin and the occupants inside rolled and tumbled as the coach swayed. His efforts came too late. The team and vehicle cannoned on by. Muddy water flew in sheets, splattering the figures doubly, first from the horses's hooves and then from the iron wheels.

The child's piercing shriek was drowned out in drunken laughter. "It's all right." Clarence DeCamp swayed forward and shouted in Gill's ear. "Missed 'em by a mile. Go it! I'd always heard you Americans were great drivers!"

Simultaneously, Reggie Beresford slapped Rowdy's shoulder and pointed. "There's the place! Up ahead! Pull up, man. Pull up!"

"Whoa! Whoa!" By this time Randolph MacPherson, the driver, was standing in the box, hauling on the traces. His great strength pulled both horses back on their haunches. The coach slewed sideways in the wet street. Drunken voices cursed and laughed uproariously.

"Oh, well done. Is that the Yankee way?"

"Great job!" The coach doors burst open and three young men issued forth into the street. "Great job!"

Two reeled about, bumping into each other and laughing. The third descended last, straightening his silk topper. His lip curled in some disdain. Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot, shot a withering glance at the box before shrugging his thin shoulders and turning to make his way carefully up the stoop. "Don't dally," he called over his shoulder. "We have other game afoot."

The Honorable Clarence DeCamp swung down from the top of the coach. "You'll have to hunt with us, MacPherson," he called. "A dashed good driver like yourself must be a crack shot."

Randolph MacPherson, Rowdy to his friends, tossed the reins to the footman at the Devil's Palace and swung down. Six foot six in his stocking feet, he frowned over the heads of the smaller men who milled around his huge frame. In the pool of light from the lamppost, the two figures still crouched. He had drenched a couple of females with filthy water. As he watched, the woman pulled a white handkerchief from her bag and wiped at her little girl's face. Anxious to make amends, he tugged off his Stetson hat and started toward them.

In response to the viscount's knock, the doors of the establishment swung open. "Don't dally, man," Cheviot called to the Texan. "You've never seen anything like this place. I swear. It makes losing your money a pleasure."

Rowdy hesitated. He should go over to apologize and offer money for their clothing. The rush of the night air in his face along with the exertion required to control the galloping team had rendered him relatively sober.

At that moment, the woman straightened and fastened an accusing glare on him. Her fist clenched around her soiled handkerchief. "Men!"

Rowdy hunched his shoulders and allowed himself to be hustled inside.

We're a far piece from San Antonio, was his first thought as he was escorted into the antechamber. His eyes widened at the sight of a sliver of a man with waxed black moustaches and

hair slicked down with Macassar oil. He stood at attention, dressed all in black, and—

"I'll be damned." Six-foot-six Rowdy had to stoop to inspect him in the dim light. Horns. Tiny goat horns curved up through the thick black waves of the man's hair. Rowdy blinked and rocked back on his heels.

"He's a demon." Clarence DeCamp slapped Rowdy on the back. "Told you this place was different."

Rowdy looked around him warily. "Where'd you say we were?"

"The Devil's Palace."

The Texan let his eyes rove around the dark red chamber with its flickering red lamps. Above the door crouched a pair of golden dragons, breathing fire at each other. Their tails writhed and twisted halfway down either side of the jamb. Several demons, all in black with the same tiny horns poking through the hair above their temples, were at work, divesting the gentlemen of their overcoats and hats. One stood at an inner door offering fine Havana cigars on a brass tray.

Rowdy grinned and nudged Gill. "I never figured we'd find Hell around here. The Llano in August is more like it."

"I don't think we ought to be here," came Gill's uneasy comment.

"Sure we should. We're doing the town."

"Yeah, but what are we letting ourselves in for?"

Rowdy leaned over his cousin's shoulder. "It'll be worth it if we can finagle an invitation from Cheviot. That herd of his is supposed to be one of the best."

Gill still balked. "I think we ought to make an appointment and talk business. Hanging around places like this isn't going to make him want to sell us his cattle."

Rowdy threw his arm around Gill's neck. "It's one way. He'll think we're 'a bit of all right.'" He imitated the clipped British speech. "And invite us down to the country." He looked up at the dragons, then at the viscount, who was selecting a cigar from the demon's box. He raised his voice. "Come on. Take it easy. In the meantime we can at least have a good time. It's all right to have a good time."

Gill shook his head. Although he barely came to Rowdy's shoulder and at twenty was four years younger than Rowdy, he took their responsibilities very seriously. Cattle was their object. Fine English Herefords to strengthen the herds of El Rincon. Even though Audley was the homeseat of a world-famous herd, the Earl of Audley was the breeder, not his son the viscount. Gill had serious doubts about all these people. In all likelihood he and his cousin were being played for fools.

Before he could argue further, Cheviot took his arm. "And have a good time you shall. I promise it."

"Looks good at the start," Rowdy said.

"Cigars, sir?" the demon inquired politely of the Texans.

"Why sure." Rowdy helped himself to one. From his vest pocket he pulled out a silver clipper and cut off the tip. The demon struck a lucifer on the striker and Rowdy puffed industriously.

"Ready, gentlemen." The demon who had helped Rowdy off with his overcoat moved in front of them.

"Ready!"

Cheviot nodded coolly.

"Be quick about it!" DeCamp called.

The demon turned and knocked loudly on the double doors. Immediately, they swung open. He stepped aside and bowed low. "Then, gentlemen, welcome to the Devil's Palace."

A roulette table with its whirling and clicking ball dominated the room. Around it gathered a mixture of men in business suits and evening dress. Here and there, a woman clung to one's side, hands clenched, watching the play with fevered concentration. Eyes alight with eagerness, the Honorable Clarence shouldered his way into their midst.

At more than four tables men and a few women gambled at the turn of a card to make or break *vingt-et-un*. At a couple of tables, dice rolled and players howled or groaned as the ivory cubes increased or decreased their fortunes.

"Pretty impressive, wouldn't you say?" Cheviot murmured in his ear. "Bet you don't have anything like this in Texas."

Rowdy whistled between his teeth. "You're sure right about that."

Cheviot hesitated, then his patrician nostrils pinched as he inhaled deeply of the smoke-filled air. "I say, old man, what about a bit of a loan? Just for a stake, you understand?"

Rowdy felt the hair prickle on the back of his neck. What had he let himself in for?

High color tinged Cheviot's cheeks. His own teeth were set as if to bite off the hateful words. "Find m'self financially to let until the quarter. The old pater's out of the country or I wouldn't ask."

Himself the son of a father who was less than tolerant of youthful spreeds, Rowdy could understand Cheviot's plight. He grinned companionably as he pulled his wallet from his breast pocket and peeled out several bills. "Been there myself, old son."

A demon slid by with a tray of wine. Rowdy helped himself and tasted it. He made a face. "Hey there, fella, you wouldn't happen to have some bourbon around here somewhere, would you?"

The demon shook his head. "I don't believe so, sir, but we do have Scotch."

"Now you're talking." Rowdy set the wine back on the tray and the demon hurried away.

"Rowdy . . ." Gill cautioned.

"Hey, lookee there. Would you look at what's coming?" Rowdy grinned in delight.

The Devil himself came through another set of dragon doors toward them. He wore full evening dress, with crimson-lined cape billowing behind him. His hair was midnight black except for white wings at his temples, wings that curled upward into horns.

"That's Baal," Clarence DeCamp informed him. "Owns this place and a dozen other businesses besides. Some of them are even legitimate. Devil's own luck, they say."

"Baal, huh?" Rowdy grinned and stuck out his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Though Edward Sandron's lips twitched, he bowed formally, maintaining his suitable demonic decorum. Then he returned the handshake. "As I am pleased to meet you."

"This young fellow here is my cousin Gill. We're from Texas."

"You, too, are welcome." Edward extended his hand to the younger man, who hesitated fractionally before taking it firmly.

With a look around the expectant circle, Baal extended the invitation to the entire group. He swept his crimson cape aside as if he were a conjurer. "It's all here waiting for you. Lose your money. Lose your property. Lose your souls."

"Oh, God," Gill groaned.

With a upward quirk of his arched black brows, the devil shook a long finger at the Texan. "No mention of that one here. We don't allow such language."

Everyone laughed, some a little uneasily.

As Baal, Edward pulled his crimson cloak across his body and intoned. "Empty your pockets. It's only money. Made to be spent. Place your bets wherever you like. I promise you the excitement will come."

"Poker play good tonight?" Clarence asked.

Baal's lips thinned. "As always, DeCamp. House rules." He inclined his head, and with a swirl of his crimson satin he was gone.

Gill stared after the departing demon king. His naturally serious personality sent a slight chill along his spine. Out of the side of his mouth, he muttered for his cousin's ear alone, "You're sure right, Rowdy. We've come a far piece from San Antonio."

Clarence DeCamp frowned at the words. Then he nudged Rowdy familiarly. "Exactly what I say. So let's get to it. Poker's a man's game. Come on, MacPherson. I've heard you Yankees are great gamblers."

Rowdy grinned. "I've played a few hands, but tell you the truth, blackjack's really my game."

"Blackjack?" Clarence's startled expression changed to puzzlement.

The demon returned with a brimming glass of Scotch. Rowdy sampled it and shuddered. "Damn, that's good. See you later."

Cheviot looked meaningfully up at the Texan. "Perhaps you'll play poker with us later?"

Rowdy sipped his drink. Again he shuddered but with much less intensity. He sucked an appreciative breath in through his mouth. So the viscount wanted to borrow money. And then win more off him at poker. Rowdy knew his game. Perhaps he'd play it for a look at that herd of world-famous Herefords. But not at first. No way was he going to make it easy for them.

"Maybe so. Right now, I see a pretty little lady demon dealer over there. She's just waiting to take my money."

"You'll have some more cocoa, won't you, Pansy?"

"No, thank you, ma'am. I have had a suf-sufficiency." Pan sat with her feet crossed at the ankles. The demitasse cup rattled only faintly in its saucer as she passed it to her hostess.

The ragged, dingy coats and scarves that enveloped her and Duchess from head to toe had been removed. Her smile like a sunflower, she had carefully arranged the skirt of her blue wool dress to show to best advantage the broad band of ecru lace above the hem. She looked very much the fashionable child. As to the manor born, she accepted a biscuit and munched delicately, her little finger crooked.

Exchanging a knowing smile with her hostess, Duchess sipped her tea. Cassandra, Edward Sandron's very pregnant wife, shifted her body into a less uncomfortable position and rested her hands on the velvet chair arms. Not for the first time, Duchess was struck by Cassandra's singular beauty. Lustrous white skin with a faint tracing of blue veins at the temples and masses of red hair that bespoke her Scots heritage, the Devil's wife looked like a Renaissance Madonna, in this case one about to become a mother for the second time.

"I wish I could be of more help," she mourned.

"The money you give for train tickets makes everything so much easier," Duchess assured her. "And I'm able to pay Bert and Peter extra for taking the risks."

"The amount of money is negligible." Cassandra waved it away with a graceful hand. "What I regret is that I can't give my time. I can't help you rescue these poor girls." She looked around her at the pleasant apartment where every comfort imag-

inable had been introduced with a lavish hand. From steam radiators to electric lights, Edward Sandron spared no expense to keep his beloved wife in the style he conceived as her due.

Duchess regarded her fondly. "You give more than enough. Without you and a few others like you, this enterprise couldn't work."

"It's so dangerous," Cassandra complained. "I hate to think of you out there alone. I should be with you. We all should. If every woman in London would present a united front, these procurers and pimps would disappear."

The women looked at each other with hopeless expressions that acknowledged the impossibility of such a thing ever coming to pass. The callous disposition of innocent young girls was engrained not just in the underworld of British society, but in the very upper crust, where titled and powerful men kept mistresses for a time and then discarded them without a thought.

They finished their tea in a pool of silence.

Duchess rose to leave. "Thank you again for the cheque. It will do so much good."

Cassandra heaved a sigh. "I still wish I could do more. And you. You must be careful. Don't become too bold. You could disappear yourself."

"I have to continue so long as I'm able."

Cassandra took her friend's hand. "My dear, I know why you do what you do. You've seen the worst. You should be extra careful not to take too many risks. This is an evil world with very few true gentlemen left. A lady is no longer safe just because she's a lady." She turned her head to one side and stared at Duchess appraisingly. "Besides. You should be looking for a nice young man with whom you can fall in love. You need a family."

Pan's eyes widened. She looked from one to the other as the amazing idea took root.

Duchess made a face. "Please. No more. I've already heard that song today. Mrs. Shires rang a peal over my head, chapter and verse."

"Then you must do as she says," Cassandra said seriously.

"She's not only very wise but very practical. My husband admires her greatly."

"I just can't abandon the girls," Duchess protested. "They'll have no chance at all."

"William Stead's articles in the *Gazette* will bring about change," Cassandra offered hopefully. "I know they will. People are incensed to find that English officials have so little care of the citizenry. The idea that a poor family could actually sell one of their daughters and she could be legally taken out of the country has shocked everyone. There will be a law—"

"Someday," Duchess interrupted. "But what about the girls being kidnapped every day and forced into prostitution? I can't abandon them."

She helped Pansy on with her garments and donned her own. Cassandra watched her with troubled eyes. When they were gone, she wrapped her arms around her gravid belly. What a terrible and brave world when young women like Duchess put themselves in danger to save others.

"That busts me one time too many, little lady." Rowdy gathered up his counters and slipped them into his pocket except for two he passed across the table to the dealer.

"Thank you, sir. Better luck next time." The dealer's white-blond hair was parted in the middle, braided, and wrapped in an elaborate chignon at the back of her neck. She would have been quite unexceptionable had the tips of black horns not protruded from the waves just behind the temples.

"Sure thing, sweetheart. Maybe next time I'll concentrate more on the cards and less on you."

"Now that wouldn't be nearly so much fun." With a soft chuckle she tucked the counters into a pocket on her belt.

As Rowdy rose, he pressed his palms into the table to steady himself. With difficulty he stifled the urge to yawn and stretch. The dark colors and the dim lights made him sleepy. The faces of the gamblers were tinged with red, probably from the red-flocked wallpapers. Another possibility, Rowdy admitted to himself, might be the heated air and the constant presence of

the demons offering liquor. So much good Scotch had made a fume in his head. He needed a breath of air.

His own private demon—the idea tickled him into widening his grin—came gliding over with a pony of Scotch. This time Rowdy accepted it with much less enthusiasm. The cigar and cigarette smoke hung heavy in the air. He inhaled deeply and smothered a cough.

French windows swagged with inevitable red drapes graced one side of the room.

"Hasta la vista, compadres," he murmured to no one in particular. Unhurriedly, he strolled to a pair of doors and pushed aside the velvet swags. A demon hastened over to open them and the Texan stepped out into the foggy London night. He found himself on a narrow terrace that ran the length of the building beside the carriage drive. Here gaslights shaped like huge medieval torches thrust out on either side of the set of double doors. Smoke and fog rose into the chilly air. Potted ferns spilled out of huge pots beside stone benches. Everything was beaded with moisture.

When the door shut behind him, Rowdy lifted his arms into the grayish black. Head thrown back to the invisible stars, he drew in a great lungful of dank cold air. The smoke, the liquor, the perfumes of the lady demons (or were they demonesses?) had clogged his mind.

He dropped his arms and rolled his shoulders. The reins in his hands tonight had felt good. The gallop through the streets had merely whetted his appetite for exercise. Far from wanting to stop, he had brought the team thundering up to the door of the gambling hell all too soon.

Except he had been driving recklessly. He shook his head and tossed the odorous cigar away. He wondered about the woman and the child. He should have gone right over and done something about them. He sighed. Too late now.

Absently, he strolled along beside the balustrade, his heels making a hollow sound against the wet stone. It was a lonely sound. Like a sudden cloud, nostalgia blanketed his spirit. He drew in a deep breath again. Texas in the winter was never so

dank as this. At that moment Rowdy longed for a dry spot where a man could sit and smoke.

He grimaced and reached into his pocket for his cigarette case. He preferred cigarettes to cigars. In actual fact, he preferred neither. Gill was right. He was behaving badly in an effort to try the forbidden pleasures these young men enjoyed. At first it had been fun, but now—

He needed to press forward on his business and get the hell home! He struck a match along the striker and brought the flame to the tip within his cupped hands.

Inside the window a voice rose in triumph followed by several groans and general grumbling. All was unintelligible. Like so much of this world where a titled nobleman needed a gambling stake from a virtual stranger. He would bet any amount of money he had been set up to gamble and lose to the viscount all with his own money.

Rowdy shivered. No poker for him tonight. With resolution he tossed the cigarette away. He'd get Gill and vamoose. In the sobering night air, he chose to remember his father's advice. "Don't bet more than you can afford to lose and don't gamble with people you don't know."

He would meet with Lord Cheviot tomorrow. If he could not get to see the famous Herefords through a business deal, then he would not see them. There had to be other good herds in England.

The cigarette's red eye winked out on the damp terrace stone. Rowdy filled his lungs once more with cold wet air. All around him were sounds, muffled and distorted in the fog. Who made them or how close they were, he could not tell. The idea of so many strangers so close made him uneasy. He missed the quiet of the prairie where each sound had a clear origin.

Before he could return to the games, his attention was drawn by the footsteps coming down the carriage drive from the back of the casino. In the light of the torches he could see two figures. They were female. One smaller than the other—a woman and her daughter.

A sudden recognition struck him. They had to be the ones he had splattered with mud. He was sure of it.

"Hey!"

The figures froze. Then the woman clapped her arm around the little girl's shoulder and urged her along.

"Hey! Hold your horses." He leaned over the balustrade, arm outstretched.

They increased their pace.

"Wait a minute!" He looked ahead and saw that he was quickly running out of terrace. He had to do something. A couple of sprinting steps. His hand on the cold stone. And he vaulted over the railing and landed in front of them. His boot-heels struck the stones like rifle shots.

The child screamed and threw her arms around the woman's waist.

"Get away!"

Chapter Three

The Chase

"Now just settle down, ladies. You don't have a thing to be afraid of." Rowdy made placating motions with his hands.

"Just get away from us!" the woman cried. "We don't have any money." She had thrust the little girl behind her.

Rowdy took a step backward even as he shook his head. "Hold on. I didn't come after you to rob you. I just wanted—"

"I'm just six years old," the little girl whimpered.

"I don't want—" Rowdy tried again.

"I've got the pox," the woman snapped.

"I'm real sorry to hear that, ma'am. I swear . . ." Rowdy clapped his hand over his heart. "I just thought I'd stop y'all and tell you how sorry I was for what happened."

"Sorry?" The woman straightened out of her protective crouch.

"Sorry for what?" The little girl peered around the woman's side. "What's he sorry for, Duchess?"

"Sssh!"

"Duchess?"

"It's just a joke."

He paused, uncertain. The mention of the pox had chilled his enthusiasm for the encounter. Only good manners kept him from climbing back onto the terrace and returning to the games.

Whore or not, he had splashed her clothes and put her and her child in jeopardy. He thought of pressing some money on her and leaving. But the cultured tones of her voice intrigued him. Besides, the little girl had called her Duchess.

By the light of the terrace lamps, he tried unsuccessfully to give her an appraising look. She could not have been much more than five feet tall. The way the enveloping coat hung in drapes and folds around her, he had a hunch her figure was slight. Of her face, he could see nothing. A wide-brimmed hat tied down over her ears effectively kept her features in darkness. Six foot six himself, he stooped, but couldn't get a look at her face.

She shrank back. "Keep away from me!"

Her voice was light and melodious, without age-deepening timbre. He judged her to be quite young. Too young to have a six-year-old. He straightened. "Listen, ma'am—"

"Please, don't trouble yourself anymore," she interrupted. "You don't have to be concerned about what happened. Quite obviously, you were in a hurry."

"Well, sort of, but you see there wasn't any emergency." He shrugged his shoulders. "I was driving way too fast."

"You did get us awfully wet." The child came out from behind the woman and faced him squarely. From her stance and her accusatory tone, he surmised she had lost her fear of him. "Duchess was furious."

"Pansy, don't say another word." The woman caught the little girl by the shoulders and pulled her back into the shelter of her arms.

He tried to get a look at her again, but she took another step backward, pulling her companion with her. He tried a different tack. "I've never met a duchess before."

"It's a joke," she insisted. "A stupid joke."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'm from out of town, so I don't get it, but I don't reckon I have to."

A moment's pause while she seemed to be digesting what he had said. "Reckon?"

"Reckon. Er—guess—suppose." Rowdy tried his most engaging grin.

"Oh." The woman took a firm grip on the little girl's hand. "Well, welcome to London, and thank you very much. We accept your apology, but we really have to be on our way."

She tried to dodge around him, but he blocked her. "Please, ma'am. I haven't made an apology. And I'd really like to."

She jerked her head toward the terrace where the torches flared and smoked. "If you came out of that place, you don't have to apologize to the likes of me."

He stepped back and swept her a bow as courtly as ever a *grandee* bestowed on a *señorita* of his choice. "Ma'am, I do. My maw raised me for a gentleman. Something I must've forgot when I was stampeding that team through the streets."

"Stampeding?"

"What's stampeding?" the little girl wanted to know. Despite Duchess's restraining grasp, she stepped closer.

Rowdy hunkered down to put his face at the child's level. "Stampeding is running wild. I was running the horses wild when I ought to've remembered the folks on the sidewalks. Running a buckboard over the prairie is a mite different from swinging a coach around corners where ladies like you might get in the way. I'm real sorry I splattered your clothes and I want to make it up to you."

He could see the flash of white teeth in the shadow of the little girl's hat. He grinned back.

She giggled and clapped her hands over her mouth. "I don't understand a lot of what you're saying. You use a lot of funny words."

"It's cause I'm used to using them. They just slip out."

She thought about it for a few seconds, her head tipped to one side. "Why would you s-st-stampede horses?"

"Cause I was trying to show off. Even grown-ups do that sometimes. And when they do, they act just like little fellers."

"I show off sometimes," Pan agreed. "And then I'm so sorry afterward."

"Everybody is," he agreed.

They smiled at each other as if they shared a secret.

Duchess stirred restively, anxious to be gone. Her tone was all impatience and exasperation. She reached down to take

Pan's hand again, but the little girl balked. "Your apology really isn't necessary. Come, Pansy. We really must be going."

Peering directly into his face, Pan smiled her sweetest smile. "You don't talk like anybody I ever heard before. Where do all your funny words come from?"

He shrugged. "They come from Texas, I guess. I talk like all the other cowboys."

She giggled again. "That's another funny word. 'cow-boy.' I never heard of a cowboy."

He twisted his neck to look up at the duchess. Her face was still in the shadow of her hat, but he could see a pale oval with large eyes and a generous mouth. "I guess it is a funny word. But I swear that's what I am."

He rose and presented himself. "Randolph MacPherson, ma'am. At your service."

Duchess murmured something unintelligible, but the little girl tilted her head back on her slender neck. "You're so tall."

He grinned down at her. She was a little charmer for sure. Her face now in the light of torches and lamppost was like a flower. She had clear white skin, even features, and a sweet smile, all of which belied her rags. "Sure enough. I just kept on growing when I probably should have stopped." He turned his attention to the duchess again. "Ma'am, I'd be happy to pay to have your clothes cleaned. Or even buy you some new ones. If you'll just give me your address—"

"Oh, no you don't." The request for information galvanized Duchess into action. Dragging Pan past him, she tried to hurry on her way. Over her shoulder she called. "That won't be necessary. You didn't really splatter our clothes badly. They're just old clothes."

Rowdy caught up with her and barred her way again. "Ma'am. If you'd allow me to give you a ride, I could send somebody around tomorrow to pick your things up and have them cleaned. I'd really feel better about it all."

"Would you really?" Pan sounded enthusiastic. She balked again, dragging back on the arm that tried to hurry her along. "Wouldn't that be nice, Duchess? I think that would be so nice."

"No! Come, Pansy." This time Duchess did not try to slip aside. Instead, she confronted him. He was not going to hurt her. Of that she was fairly sure, but she wanted nothing to do with him. His kind would be polite for a while, but in the end they wanted the same things that all men did. She sucked in her breath and walked straight into him.

"Get out of my way!" she exclaimed. "Go back to your drinking and gambling and leave decent folk to hurry home."

Her strategy did succeed in throwing him off balance. Unfortunately, his bootheel caught in a crevice between the paving stones. His arms windmilled to keep himself upright. One sweeping gesture knocked her hat off.

Before she could catch it and right it, it tumbled to the ground. A long skein of dark hair rippled down her shoulder.

"I'm sure sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to . . ."

They both stooped to reach for the hat. Their faces were close, the flickering torchlight falling full on hers.

"Why, ma'am . . ." His apology choked off. Her skin was porcelain. Her eyes, large, luminous, and dark as the hair that fell to her waist. Though she set her mouth in a tight disapproving line, he would bet his bottom dollar it would be something to see curved in a smile. While she froze, overset by his nearness and her own fear, he retrieved the hat and scarf and straightened. ". . . you're beautiful."

"Ooooh, yes, she is, and she's so good." In her excitement to compliment her idol, Pan tugged at Rowdy's coat. "We're rescuers, you know."

"Pansy, hush." To Rowdy she said, "You're drunk."

"No, ma'am," he denied, clapping his hand to his chest. In fact, the cold night air and the delightful adventure had cleared his head of almost all traces of alcohol. He realized he felt better than he had in a long time. Maybe since he had come to England. "My papa taught me not to drink and gamble at the same time unless I wanted to wake up sick and broke."

While Duchess sniffed in disbelief, he directed his next question to the little girl. "What's a couple of pretty ladies like yourselves doing out here at night? And what're you rescuing?"

"Pan, don't say a word." Mouth tight, Duchess reached for

her hat, but he dropped his hand to his side, letting the hat dangle against his leg. She took a swipe at it. "I'll thank you, Mr. Mac-er—"

Keeping it behind his legs, he passed it into his other hand. "MacPherson, ma'am."

She made a second grab for it. And again he transferred it. She tossed her hair back over her shoulder. Eyes snapping with irritation, she dug her fists into her hips. "Mr. MacPherson, I'm trying to mind my own business. Give me back my hat so we can be on our way."

He eyed the narrow breadth approvingly. She was as slender as he had imagined. He flashed her his best and most practiced smile. "Now, ma'am. I absolutely insist on escorting you two lovely ladies home."

"I've told you—"

"I like him, Duchess."

"Thank you, sweetheart." He winked at Pan even as he offered his arm to Duchess. "Please, ma'am."

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Duchess let go of Pan's hand to make another grab for her hat.

He switched it around the backs of his thighs yet again. "Maybe I haven't offered you the right thing yet?"

Duchess drew back. She had been expecting this. Actually, he had delayed quite a long time. She lifted her chin in the torchlight. Her delicate nostrils flared.

Rowdy knew a moment of uncertainty. *What if . . .* He shrugged. "Maybe if I offered you some money . . ."

He let his words trail away in the silence.

She looked at him as if he were a spider. Her voice was icy. "I don't want your money. You have made a grave mistake, sir. I am not for sale. All I want is my hat."

The highest-priced prostitutes always protested the most. Where had he heard that? She was certainly beautiful enough. Maybe she didn't want the child to know. "Tell me where I can find you tomorrow."

"Come, Pansy. We don't need that old hat anyway." Duchess brushed by him, her nose in the air.

He caught her arm. "How about three hundred dollars and a new dress?"

Her eyes flashed fire in the terrace lamps. "Take your hand off me."

"New outfits for both of you. That's my last offer."

"You can take your offer and choke on it."

"Ma'am . . ." He was reluctant to let her go. Was he wrong about her? Was she really a lady? A duchess in disguise?

"Take your hand off me this instant."

His hand fell away. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to—"

At that moment a terrace door swung open. "MacPherson! Halloo! Are you out there?"

Rowdy turned half around.

Clarence DeCamp leaned out the French window, peering owlshly into the night. "Halloo!"

The interruption gave Duchess the opportunity she needed. Her skirts swished against his legs as she brushed past him. "Come, Pansy."

"MacPherson. Halloo!"

"Right here!" Irritation turned Rowdy's voice into an angry shout. He pivoted back to follow Duchess.

Clarence DeCamp squinted in the direction of the voice. "What are you doing out there, my good man? We're here to gamble."

Duchess halted at the entrance to the drive. Silhouetted in the gray dimness of the fog, she looked back at him. With a sigh and a shrug he waited for her to disappear. She had been beautiful, but there were other beauties.

"Be right there," he called.

"Ah, good. Lady Luck's not sitting on anyone's shoulder. Perhaps she's waiting for you." The gambler gave a bark of laughter.

Rowdy felt a tug at his coat. He looked down. The little girl Pansy smiled up at him.

"You're ever so handsome," she cooed. "And you said you were sorry."

"I am sorry."

She nodded, her little hands caressed his garment. "Duchess is so good."

"Pan! Come with me this instant!"

"I think you're a nice man."

He touched her cheek as she passed him. "Take care of yourself, little miss."

She seemed to stumble. Her hands caught at his body to steady herself. She smiled winningly up at him. "I will. Thank you ever so much."

"You're welcome."

She trotted away.

"For heaven's sake." DeCamp's voice had sharpened with irritation. "It's like ice out here. You'll catch your death before you lose all your money to me."

"I'm coming." Bent on dismissing the woman and the girl from his mind, Rowdy resisted the urge to tell DeCamp to go to hell. Resolutely, he climbed the terrace steps.

"I've always heard Americans like to play for high stakes," DeCamp hinted silkily.

Rowdy's eyebrow rose. "That so?" He reached into his coat pocket for his silver cigarette case. It was gone! he patted his hips. His wallet was gone! His gold watch and chain. Gone! The little girl! The hands tugging at his coat. The stumble! Pansy had picked not one, but three of his pockets!

He swung round, coattails flaring. "Hey! Stop!"

"MacPherson! I say . . ."

Rowdy cleared the balustrade in a leap. His bootheels cracked like pistol shots as he charged down the drive.

DeCamp stared after him as if Rowdy were mad. Then he cursed vilely before he slammed inside out of the cold.

Duchess and her charge were passing under the streetlight at the corner where he had seen them first. When she heard his bootheels, Pan threw one quick look over her shoulder and bolted.

"What?" Duchess stared after her and then back at Rowdy.

"Stop that brat!" he skidded by her and made the turn in Pan's direction.

"You let her alone!" Duchess shouted. She managed to grab

a handful of his flying coat tail, but she could not stop him. His strength dragged her after him. "Don't you hurt her! She's just a little girl!"

The culprit darted into an alley.

"She's a thief," Rowdy snarled.

Duchess dug in her heels and hauled back. "She's a baby!"

Without missing a steps, he slid out of his coat. Duchess stumbled back with it empty in her hands.

He plunged into the alley. Ahead of him in the dark, he heard the hurrying footsteps. He closed his eyes for the barest seconds. When he opened them, he could see the little figure dodging back and forth around cellar doors and various boxes and barrels.

Here the race belonged to her, for he did not know the way. He cursed as he barked his knees on low obstacles. His boots splashed through water. So much for his new evening clothes.

Behind him, he heard Duchess shout. "Let her go!"

"Not a chance!"

At the end of the alley, Pan slipped through the narrowest of openings between the boards of a four-foot fence. Rowdy did not hesitate. Lengthening his stride, he stretched out across it, clearing it with plenty of room to spare.

Pan shrieked when she saw his huge form come flying toward her. Another alley cut off to the left. She darted for it.

"No, you don't!" Rowdy's long arm shot out. His hand latched on to her collar.

"Lemme go!" She twisted in his hand and kicked him in the ankle, doing little damage to the hand-tooled leather boot.

"You little devil."

"Lemme go! Lemme go! You big bully! Picking on a little girl! Help! Help!" She kicked him again, connecting with his knee.

"Ow!"

"Let her go!" Duchess called from the other side of the fence. "Don't you dare hurt her."

"I'm not hurting her," he snarled. "She's hurting me." Her teeth grazed his hand before he could shift his grip. "Ow! Dammit!"

"You're hurting me! You're hurting me!" Pan yelled. Her fingers tore at the buttons on her coat.

But Rowdy knew her game, having just played it himself. She was only half out of the garment when he caught her by the ankle and upended her.

"Ow-ooo!" She fell on her side, still scrambling and twisting to get away.

"Let's see what you've got there." He gave her a shake.

"Lemme go! Lemme go!" She kicked at him with her free leg. In retaliation he plucked her up, so that only her head touched the ground. Her skirts fell over her face. Immediately she began to bat at them, setting up a howl as if she were being tortured. "Umph! You're killin' me. I'm dyin'. Ow! Duchess!"

"Don't hurt her!" Duchess could neither slip through the hole in the fence as Pan had done nor vault it as Rowdy had. She tried to throw her leg over the top, but her skirt was too narrow. It pulled her standing leg out from under her and dropped her back, still floundering onto the muddy stones.

"Ah-hah! My wallet if I'm not much mistaken." Rowdy pulled the item from the welter of skirts and held it aloft. "Where's my cigarette case?"

Another shake and it fell out onto the ground. He scooped it up and tucked it into his pocket. "Do I have to shake some more to get my watch?"

"No-o-o-oh! Here, take it." The little girl fumbled at the skirt and, after much grunting and groaning, thrust it up to him.

He caught it by the chain and restored it to its proper place. "You could go to jail for this."

"I was so hungry." Pan began to wail. "I'm just a starving orphan."

Rowdy gave her another shake. "You! Ha! I ought to paddle your behind. You don't feel like you've missed any meals. Not by a long shot. You must weigh fifty, maybe sixty pounds."

"Oo! I do not. I'm just six."

"I don't believe that for a minute. Let's see what else you've stolen." He began to pat at her skirts.

"Stop it! Help! Duchess! He's beating me!"

Desperate to reach Pan, Duchess flung Rowdy's coat atop

the fence and tore at the boards. One came away, its nails protesting. She flung herself at the space. Her own coat ripped at the shoulder. A nail gouged her scalp and pulled several strands of hair out by the roots. She pushed her shoulders through, but her hips stuck.

Rowdy came up with another object. "What's this?"

"It's *my* purse!" Pan insisted desperately. The game had turned serious. Real tears were very close to the surface, but Rowdy was too incensed to notice. "It's mine. Leave it alone. Ow!"

"Let's get you out of here and see what all you've got." Rowdy strode out of the alley to a lighted streetcorner.

"I don't have anything." Pan began to cry.

He might have reacted to the real distress in the little girl's voice had not Duchess come clattering after him and launched herself at his back. "Let her go!" she screamed. "Let her go!"

Quick as a cat, he spun, placing Pan's dangling body between them. His arm snagged around the child and dragged her in against him. "Stay back! If you jump on me, I'm liable to drop her on her head."

Duchess missed the teasing note in his voice. White hot fury streaked through her veins. "*Let her go!*"

Pan pushed her skirts up away from her face. "He's stolen my purse," she declared mournfully. "He's going to beat me and take me to jail. And I thought he was such a nice man."

Beside herself with emotion, Duchess took a deep shuddering breath. "Have you gotten your wallet back?"

"Right here." He let go of Pan's ankle to pat his pocket.

"And what else did you lose?"

"A cigarette case and—Hey! I'll have to take a count. No telling how much stuff she took off me." He adopted a stern tone although there was a trace of humor in his voice. Pansy was strangely still, almost relaxed in his arms.

Duchess, who had lost all semblance of decorum, stood before him, fists doubled, breathing hard. By the light of the streetlamp, he could see her delicate features, alive with emotion. Her hair had come down completely and swirled about

her shoulders like a midnight cape. She took a deep breath that lifted what he was sure would be a superb bosom.

"Let her go," she said between clenched teeth.

"Why should I? She's a thief. She ought to be arrested."

Pansy lifted her head to look up into his face. She managed a sweet smile. "I'm too young to go to jail. I'm just—"

Rowdy squeezed her until she squeaked. "Don't say it again."

Duchess wrung her hands. "She really is six-er-seven."

"Or eight or nine."

"No. Just seven."

"Seven. Just a few days ago," Pan admitted. "I forgot."

Rowdy looked at the woman standing before him. She was not only beautiful, but young. He was nearly certain that she could not be old enough to have a seven-year-old daughter. He regarded her critically. "You aren't her mother."

The assertion changed the entire tone of the encounter. Suddenly she was on the alert. "No." *What difference did that make?* "But I take care of her."

"Then you ought to do a better job," he declared sternly.

"I'm gonna be sick," Pan moaned unconvincingly.

Duchess held out her hands. "Please."

He grinned as he tipped Pan back over onto her feet. She would have darted away, but he transferred his grip to her shoulders. He could feel the little girl's even breathing. She leaned against him relaxed, not at all concerned that he held her. What sort of game was she playing? "Why would you care about a thief? Are you one of those do-gooder duchesses that disguises herself and goes among the poor?"

Duchess clasped her hands tightly in front of her. "I never met a do-gooder duchess, as you call her. We're both poor."

He grunted in disbelief.

"Well, not poor exactly," she amended. "But not rich like you. Why, you probably lost enough gambling tonight to pay for our keep for a month—maybe two months."

"So you figure that makes it all right to steal what I didn't lose?"

"No."

"No," Pan echoed. "I was wrong. But I'm so-o-o sorry." She gave a little hiccup as if she were snubbing back tears.

The pathetic sound affected Duchess more than Rowdy. She reached for the child, her hands brushed against his. "Oh, let her go. She's just a little girl."

Still keeping his grip on the child, he looked around for his coat. "While I make up my mind what to do, why don't you mosey back over to that fence and get the rest of my property."

Duchess flashed him a look that should have killed him dead on the spot before she marched back and jerked the abused garment off the wet, rough boards. The distraction gave her time to try a new tack. She handed him his coat, and as he donned it, she began to plead, "You don't know how you tempted her. You came out of the Devil's Palace, where you'd been throwing your money around. You were rich and smelling of expensive brandy and cigars. You stopped us and offered to buy us new clothes. How could she resist?"

"You ought to teach her better."

"She does." Pan tilted her head back against his belly and gave him her sweetest smile. "I just can't resist sometimes."

"You're a liar as well as a thief." How he managed to maintain a stern demeanor at this stage of the game was a wonder to him.

"She's a starving child."

"Not her." He chuckled and tipped Pan's head back again. "Cheeks like a little piglet."

Pan's expression darkened. Her lower lip popped out. She squirmed under his hands. "I'm not a piglet. You take that back."

Duchess tried a new tack. "Wouldn't you consider that you were giving her something out of charity?"

Rowdy had long since lost his sense of outrage. The evening had turned from tedious to interesting to downright exciting. This pair might be thieves, but they were the most entertaining people he had met in England. If he stalled and argued long enough, the duchess might be persuaded to give him her address in exchange for her freedom.

"No. I wouldn't," he answered sternly. "I gave the waiters

and dealers in that saloon back there my money. They did a good job for me and I reckon they've got children to feed."

Duchess could feel the hot blush rising in her cheeks. He was right and she hated him for it. "You're a barbarian."

"You're a fine one to be calling names. For all I know, you two work together. Maybe you're the boss. Maybe you're corrupting this sweet child."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, no," the sweet child protested. "She's good."

He looked sternly down into Pan's face. "Are you sure she's not corrupting you?"

"No," came the instant reply.

He looked up at Duchess. "Y'all are likely in cahoots."

"I don't know what that means."

Suddenly, he opened his hands and spread his arms wide. "It means, you're working together to rob me."

"No, I'm not!" Free at last, Pan sped away down the street.

When Duchess would have followed, one of Rowdy's long arms looped around her shoulders. "I've let her go." He pressed his mouth against her ear. "You've got what you wanted. Now why don't you pay me back for my trouble?"

She stiffened. His warmth and scent and strength were all around her. "I don't know that you had any trouble. You've gotten your wallet back. You've lost nothing."

He touched her cheek with the tip of his index finger. She actually jumped as if she had been touched by an electric shock. His mouth spread in a knowing smile. "Lookie here. I tromped through mud in my best boots and tore my pants on nails. And I bet I'll limp for a week on that leg where that little outlaw kicked my kneecap."

Duchess tried to free herself from the embrace, but he tightened it, pulling her close against his chest. Her arms came up to push him away and were trapped between them. Then he straightened and her feet left the ground. "Oo-oo-oh! Put me down."

"Not just yet. I want a little revenge." The words were delivered a little breathlessly as his heartbeat stepped up. The time required to get ready to take the trip, the long ocean voyage,

the time in London had all been spent in the company of men. He had not held a woman against him in months. Now his body startled him with its reaction.

"You splattered us," she protested. "I consider that—What are you doing? Wait . . ."

With his free hand he brushed a lock of hair back from her cheek. She had skin like porcelain. His fingertips traced the sculpted cheekbone. Softly, he put his lips where his fingertips had been. "I don't believe you've got the pox."

She shivered and jerked her head back. "Of course I have. Let me go." She began to struggle in earnest, twisting her body, pushing and bucking against him.

He felt the heat of her breasts, belly, thighs. It aroused him powerfully. He set his mouth against her ear. "Keep on the way you're wiggling, lady, and you're going to get more than you bargained for."

Abruptly, she stilled. "Let me go," she whispered a little shakily. "I've got the pox. You'll—er—you'll get it."

"No. I don't think so. You're not a very good liar, lady."

"I don't lie." She twisted her head away, a difficult feat as she tried to keep her body still.

He waited, enjoying the feel of her. Then he kissed her cheek again. His lips touched her ear. "You ought to give me something to pay me back for all the trouble I've been to."

"No. I don't owe you anything."

"Sure you do." He nibbled her earlobe. "I'll even pay you for it. That way you and that 'pore li'l mite' won't starve to death."

She stiffened as he moved his hips back and forth against her. "No." Her voice had changed. No longer was it protesting or defiant. A note of fright had entered it. "No."

He gave her his best smile. "Now, little lady, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not that kind of a fellow. I told you, my maw raised me to be a gentleman."

Her voice wavered. "A gentleman wouldn't force his attentions on a lady."

"No lady would have the pox." His hand slid down her spine,

dipped under the small bustle, and found the curve of her hip where it met her thigh.

"I—"

"Too many lies," he whispered as his mouth cut off what she would have said.

His lips demanded that she part her own. His tongue rasped gently against skin like wet satin. Then it slid within to touch her teeth. She shivered. His arms tightened as he arched his back, pressing her body against his.

A sudden shameful excitement raced through her. She was helpless. He could do anything he pleased. She had no control. She could not free herself, and she was not ignorant of what his maleness did to her body. She was nothing—no weight at all—in his arms. And they were wrapped around her tightly. Her feet must have been dangling more than a foot above the ground. His tongue ravaged her mouth until his chest heaved from want of air.

He groaned and slipped one arm down her body. His big hand covered her buttock and pulled her tight against him. He was hot. Hot and hard.

Warmth poured through her veins. Something very like pain sang through her. Her breath caught in her throat. This was it. This was the desire that she had heard described over and over. She recognized it for what it was.

And tried to tear her mouth away from his.

But the kiss went on until she could struggle no longer.

He could feel every curve of her body. Small she might be, but she was perfect. Her breasts pressed against his chest through the thicknesses of their clothing. No child. A woman. A young, beautiful, desirable—

He'd only meant to kiss her to tease her. To teach her a little lesson. Now his ears were buzzing. He could think of nothing except how sweet she tasted and how good she felt. And he was almost four long months from Texas and the friendly women in San Antonio.

He tore his mouth away only when he could not last another second without a breath of air.

Still clasped to his body, she looked up into his face. He had tipped his head back so the light fell full on it.

For the first time she saw his features. Chin, cheeks, jaw, the strong straight nose, the ridges above his deep-set eyes softened only slightly by the wings of his eyebrows. Even his temples were bony.

He was the hardest man she had ever seen—and the most handsome.

His beauty frightened her. She was vulnerable as she had never been in her life.

In a panic, careless of whether he dropped her or not, she brought both knees up against his thighs and tried to push her arms out straight from her shoulders. Anything to pry herself out of the circle of his arms and away from contact with his body. She had to get away. Had to. He was the one. The first one. Perhaps the only one capable of destroying her.

Rowdy opened his eyes to the terror in hers. "I'm sorry," he rasped. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Well, you did," she groaned. "Let me go."

"Easy." He stooped. She put her feet down and felt the pavement.

Her knees would have buckled, but he held her as if he knew what she was feeling.

"Take it easy," he repeated.

She stepped back out of his arms. Her hand rose to touch her swollen mouth with fingers that trembled.

He watched her face, saw the fear and the realization as she backed away from him. How fast it had all happened! Like a lightning bolt out of a Texas tornado.

Behind her, farther down the street, almost to the end of block, he could see the girl Pan. She was standing with her hands on hips. And he could swear she had a grin on her face.

Duchess shook her head. Her eyes were wide, an appalled expression in them.

He took a step toward her, hand outstretched. "Don't go. At least tell me your name."

"No!" The word burst from her like a cannon shot. She

swung her leg back. The toe of her boot caught him high on the shin just below his kneecap, the one Pan had kicked.

"Goddamn!" He doubled over, grabbing the injury.

She turned in a swirl of long black hair and ran. The little girl joined her and they disappeared around the corner.

Staggering one-legged, pain shooting all the way from toe to hip, he ended up against the lamppost, where he leaned massaging the shin and cursing softly. But his anger had already changed to a rueful grin. In a very few seconds, he put his foot on the sidewalk and gingerly tried his weight on it.

He listened, but he could no longer hear their footfalls. He had to hand it to both of them. They certainly knew how to discourage a man.

Suddenly, he realized he was cold. He looked around him and groaned. He thrust his hands into his pockets and started back the way he had come. Only by retracing his steps through the alleys and over the fences could he be sure to find the Devil's Palace. It was only a little distance, but so much had happened to him.

He kept telling himself it was the excitement, the liquor, the gambling, the exotic casino. But he knew it was none of these.

It was something like love.

Chapter Four

Revelations

"He kissed you ever so long," Pan observed when Duchess had slowed to a fast walk.

Duchess made no reply. Her breath was still coming hard. Dragging Pan along with her, she had run until she could run no longer. A stitch gnawed away at her side. She was miserable and angry and not a little afraid.

"And then you kicked him," Pan continued as if Duchess had not been there to see it and endure it all. "He used some bad words then. I heard him. He was real mad, but he didn't come after us."

"I hope I crippled him for a week," Duchess panted. "Man-handling me like that."

"Uh-huh. I watched him do that. I thought he was going to hurt you when he picked you up. But he didn't." Pan skipped along beside her, as blithely as if they'd been strolling through St. James's Park. "What did it feel like?"

Duchess stopped cold and rounded on her. "Why did you steal his wallet?"

Pan took her time to inspect the wet granite cornerstone of a building. "We needed our clothes cleaned."

"Pansy Bowyer, that's not true."

The little girl swished her skirts from side to side to show

their deplorable condition. "It is too. We were splashed with cold, dirty, muddy water. You said so. You were furious." She dropped the skirts and went on curiously. "What did his kiss feel like?"

"Don't change the subject. We've been splashed before. I've been furious before. It felt like a---like a kiss. Now why did you steal his wallet?"

"Did you feel his kiss all the way to your toes?"

"What?" Duchess actually staggered back. Brought up against a wrought iron fence, she stared at Pan as if she were a stranger. "What did you say?"

Pan tucked her head and began to swish her skirts again. A few seconds later, she bent to study a spot on the pavement. "What do you think this is?"

"Where did you hear such a thing?" Duchess insisted.

Pan squatted down to examine the spot more closely. Beneath her hat, her words were unconcerned. "I hear a lot of things. I can't remember where I hear them all." Satisfied that the spot held no particular mysteries nor terrors, she rose. "Did you feel hot and cold and shivery all over?"

"For heaven's sake! No!" Duchess shook her head vehemently. "Are those little boys you play with saying things to you?"

"Them. No. They're awful." Pan pulled a horrible face and stuck out her tongue.

Duchess took a stand in front of the little girl. "You're asking all these ridiculous questions to distract me. It's not going to work. Why did you steal his wallet?"

The horrible contortion changed instantly into a blinding smile. "I wonder if your kiss made him feel all hot and shivery."

"Pan!" Duchess threatened. "That's nonsense. Now tell me."

The little girl sniffed loudly. "I thought he was nice. I wanted him to fall in love with you."

"What?"

Pan squatted down to be sure the spot had not changed in some mysterious way. Duchess had to bend to hear her mumbling. "I heard what Mrs. Sandron said. You need a nice young man to love. If you loved him and he loved you, we'd have

someone to take care of us. I would have a father, and you would have a husband. It would be ever so romantic."

Duchess gasped. Was the whole world rushing her toward the altar? She sank down on the wet sidewalk in front of her charge and took her by the shoulders. "Pansy Bowyer, listen to me. Cassandra was just—that is—being . . ." She faltered. "She was just offering a suggestion to make me feel better. I don't want anyone to fall in love with me. Marriage is a business partnership. Things like that are not at all romantic."

Pan shook her head vigorously. "It is romantic. I learned about it in school."

"In school!" Duchess gasped. "I'm sure Miss Stokes doesn't teach you things like that in school."

Pan rose, her little mouth set stubbornly. "The other girls in the school have fathers. Their mothers have husbands. They talk about them all the time. I want a father too."

Duchess closed her mouth. How could she, of all people, have forgotten how empty a child's life could be without a father?

"Oh, Pansy," she whispered. Suddenly, weary unto death, she got to her feet and took the little girl's hand. Together they walked away into the fog.

"Go out on the terrace and see if you can drag the fellow in, Fanny." Clarence DeCamp spoke *sotto voce* as he laid his hand on the viscount's shoulder.

Cheviot's thin nostrils pinched. His eyes narrowed. The look he flashed the gambler was so fierce that the dealer across the table froze in the middle of the deal. "The name is Cheviot," the viscount snarled. "Remove your hand, or you will be exceedingly sorry."

The gambler dropped his hand, but his own stare did not waver. "We need MacPherson in the game. Don't forget what you owe me. Playing for a handful of shillings won't cover it."

The other players at the table sat in frozen silence. Cheviot looked around him and smiled thinly. Without a glance at his

cards, he tossed in his hand. Stiff as a poker, he rose. "Excuse me, gentlemen."

With an air of great unconcern, Cheviot strolled to the terrace door. Just as he put out his hand, it swung open, almost hitting him in the face. He recovered with a false smile. "Ah; there you are, Rowdy. We were all beginning to worry about you. Clarence said you'd dashed off in rather of a hurry."

From his seat at the poker table, Gill spotted the smear of mud on Rowdy's face and the red hair tightly curled by the dampness. Throwing in his cards, he crossed the room in quick strides. "What happened to you, cousin? You look like you've tangled with somebody."

Rowdy swiped the back of his hand across his cheek and grinned. "Somebody tried to pick my pocket."

"What, man?"

"Bad luck."

"You appear to be all right," Cheviot drawled. His eyes slid over Rowdy's form, for the first time taking in the muddled, rumpled appearance. "Are you hurt?"

"Not really. I chased after them and got my money back." Rowdy dragged his wallet out of his pocket and displayed it proudly.

"Thank God," DeCamp breathed fervently.

Baal, his face serious without the slightest hint of cynicism, pressed forward into the group. Though he still wore the devilish costume, he had assumed the persona of Edward Sandron. "Shall I send for the police?"

"Don't bother." Rowdy pushed his wallet back into his pocket. "The thief didn't get anything. And no harm's been done."

"Your clothing is damaged." The demon king shook his head at the dark stains on Rowdy's pantlegs.

Rowdy looked down. His trousers were a sorry sight as well as mud-stained halfway to the knee. Clods of mud clung to the sides of his boots and had dropped off onto the floor behind him. Still he grinned amiably. "I wasn't looking where I was stepping in the alleys. But it's just mud. It'll clean right off. I might be able to get that little tear fixed."

Sandron signaled to one of the demons. "Champagne for Mr. MacPherson."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather have some more of that Scotch whiskey. And just a touch of branch water." He clapped an arm around Gill's shoulder.

A demon hurried away to draw the requested drink. The onlookers trickled back to their tables. Gambling was the main activity of the evening as well as, for many, the controlling interest in their lives. An attempted robbery was only a momentary diversion.

Gill bent to inspect the long tear in Rowdy's trousers. Through the hole he could see an equally long and bloody scratch. "Are you sure you're all right, cousin? This looks like it could be bad."

Rowdy stooped to take a closer look at himself. The wound stung somewhat, but the bleeding had already stopped. "It's not deep. Don't mother hen me. I'm just messed up some. If I'd had a cutting horse between my legs, it wouldn't 've taken nearly as long."

"If you have your wallet, you must have caught the thief," Sandron persisted. "Did you turn him over to a policeman?"

"Nope. Let him go. Or rather her."

"A woman?" Sandron's devilish eyebrows rose to his hair-line.

"A little girl. Cried like anything. Said she was hungry." Privately, Rowdy wondered again if Duchess had encouraged her charge to steal. Somehow he did not believe that someone as proud as Duchess appeared to be would send a child on such business. She might steal herself. He shifted his weight off his leg and winced. Both of them could kick like Missouri mules.

"A little girl, you say, and a woman?" Sandron himself handed Rowdy the Scotch.

The whiskey was neat with barely a splash of water. It burned all the way down his throat. "Great stuff."

"Glad you like it. But the women . . ." Sandron hesitated. "Are you quite sure you had your pocket picked? Could you have been mistaken?"

Rowdy took another sip, more cautious this time. He stared

into the man's eyes, trying to read their expression. They were black with no division between pupil and iris. He might have been staring into a well. "I didn't make a mistake," he said quietly. "She took my wallet, my cigarette case, and my watch. Clever little devil."

Sandron glanced around him. Most of the onlookers had returned to their own pursuits. Only DeCamp and Cheviot remained, flanking MacPherson and his cousin like an armed escort. *Hawks to pluck the pigeons*, he thought.

Sandron leaned slightly forward. "Would you happen to know the name of the woman you encountered?"

"The little girl called her Duchess."

Sandron looked stern. "That woman was not a thief," he declared in a voice that brooked no argument. "I can vouch for her honesty. You must have been mistaken."

Rowdy's eyes narrowed. "I didn't say she was. The little girl was the one who picked my pocket."

Sandron shook his gleaming head. "A prank. Pan has the freest spirit one could hope to find."

"That's her name all right. And she's just six years old, according to her." Rowdy glared down at his ruined pants and scuffed, muddy boots. Then he stared at Sandron. "You know them, do you?"

Edward Sandron hesitated, suddenly aware of how his spirited defense must sound to the American. "They are acquaintances of mine."

Rowdy was regarding the Devil with a jaundiced eye. Everyone had heard of saloons where the customers were invited to drink and gamble and then get robbed on the way home. He had thought this place came too highly recommended to be one of those. "Acquaintances, huh?"

Sandron straightened haughtily. "I'm sorry that you were inconvenienced, Mr. MacPherson. If you will send me the bills from your cleaner and your tailor, I will pay them personally. There is a reasonable explanation for all this. You misunderstood, but you must not be inconvenienced."

The air between the two men was distinctly strained. Rowdy took another swallow of the whiskey. Suddenly, he had had

enough and more than enough of the Devil's Palace. High spots of color stained his cheekbones. He looked around him angrily.

"For heaven's sake, are you going to keep on asking questions all night long?" DeCamp snarled. "Come on, Rowdy. Let's have a game. Take your mind off your troubles."

Rowdy tossed the rest of the Scotch down his throat without blinking. "Sorry, fellow. This has sort of put me off my feed. I'm calling it a night. You ready, Gill?"

His cousin nodded soberly. He had been ready for hours.

"Oh, come now," Cheviot drawled. "Don't show the white feather, old man. It's early."

"Not for me, old man." Rowdy's voice had more than a hint of mockery as he set the glass on a passing demon's tray. "I might be standing here dying of lockjaw. I'm going back to the hotel and take a hot bath."

"If you think there's any danger, I can send for a doctor," Baal offered stiffly.

"Just get us a coach," Gill inserted quietly. "Rowdy and I've had enough for tonight."

"But you can't. You can't. You've not played," DeCamp objected. The sight of two plump pigeons spreading their wings to fly threw him into a turmoil. He clapped both Gill and Rowdy on the back and tried to urge them physically to the table. "Let's go, men."

But the Texans balked on him.

"No." Gill's single word without modification brooked no argument, left no opening for negotiation.

Baal nodded to a footman. "A carriage will be at the door by the time you have your things."

Gill took Rowdy's arm. "Let's go, cousin. We've got a long day tomorrow."

"A long day?" Rowdy nodded. He sighed as he remembered. "Right. Hope this hasn't queered the cattle deal."

"We'll find someone to take our money," Gill assured him.

"Right this way, gentlemen," Baal said smoothly. He steered MacPherson into the entry. Demons helped the pair into their coats.

Baal handed Rowdy his hat. "If you'll go round to Bond Street to Albrecht's, he'll be happy to fit a new suit for you."

The Texan gave the Devil a cold stare. "Much obliged, but I buy my own clothes." Where had he heard that tonight?

"Easy, cousin." Gill tried to ease his friend away from a fight and down to the coach that had rolled up to the curb.

Before he climbed into the coach, a tiny hint of humor returned. "Your friend the duchess needs the clothes more than I do," he called. "Buy them for her. Say they're from me."

"Duchess is a lady," Baal replied stiffly. "She would never accept clothing from me or any man."

Duchess uncovered Pan's head and brushed a lock of damp blond hair from her flushed cheek. Despite the warm room, heated with a silver radiator coil beneath the window, the little girl still pulled the covers over her head and curled herself into a ball every night.

On more than one occasion Duchess had tried straightening Pan's legs and body into a more comfortable position only to have the child coil back reflexively within minutes. Her little body glowing with its own healthy heat made all but a light blanket and sheet unnecessary, but Pan insisted on piling everything on.

Even as Duchess tried to turn the covers half down the little shoulder, Pan twitched and burrowed deeper.

Duchess kissed her cheek and drew back with a sigh. She had found places for all the girls except this one, for this one had claimed to have no knowledge of her parents or her past. Duchess had found her drugged inside a coffin box bound for Germany—her cornsilk hair arranged in curls on her bosom, a wreath of lavender silk roses framing her pale face. She might have been an exquisite French doll. Except she was a living child, hardly more than a baby, bound for a hellish fate.

From the time she had awakened from her drugged sleep, Pan had insisted she had no memory of her home. She had no mother, she maintained. No. Nor any father either. Mortal fear shone in her blue eyes. Her icy fingers clutched Duchess's

wrist. And from that day forward, she had never been far from her rescuer's side.

As Duchess had observed, however, her memory was very selective.

"Pansy Bowyer's m' name," she announced jauntily. "You can call me Pan."

"But Pansy's a lovely name. It's a beautiful flower."

"I'm not a pansy. I'm tough," the tiny girl had boasted. "Like a weed."

The memory made Duchess smile as she tiptoed out and left the door ajar. Pan was neither weed nor flower. She was brave as a lion, but a very tiny lion. A cub. And now the cub wanted a father.

In the little kitchen area Duchess stirred the remains of the hot chocolate she had made for Pansy and poured it into a china cup. Carrying it into their sitting room, she sank into the wingchair and pulled a crocheted shawl over her knees.

Every child must want a father. Undoubtedly Pansy presumed that Duchess had once wanted a father. And when she had found him . . .

Despite the steam heat in the cozy room, Duchess shivered.

The clock in the bookcase chimed a single note. She had not been to bed in over twenty-four hours. Her eyes felt gritty. Her shoulder stung where the nail had torn the flesh. How long had her legs ached? At hip, knee, and ankle, dull pain suddenly leaped to life. Her muscles flinched and knotted as she allowed her body to assert its demands. Surprisingly, its demands were insufficient. She should bathe and fall into bed, but her senses hummed.

The kiss! The kiss! Her heart pumped. Randolph MacPherson from Texas. A state in America, surely, but with a language unlike any she had ever heard. The Canadians, the Bostonians, the New Yorkers, even the Virginians with their soft drawls did not sound like him. They all spoke the same language, with slight variations in pronunciation.

But what were words like "cahoots," "stampeding," and "buckboard"? What did they mean? His speech was peppered with them. As well as with dozens of ordinary words made

unfamiliar by the practice of drawing out the vowels to two or three syllables. At first she could hardly understand one word in three.

But his kiss had not been misunderstood. She had understood it all too clearly. He had wanted her.

"Three hundred dollars and a new dress."

A burst of anger made her shudder again. But it was anger at herself as well. His potent maleness had ripped through her defenses. The strength of will, the intelligence, the cynicism on which she had prided herself for almost the whole of her eighteen years had been swept away in a single blinding minute.

A man's mouth on hers, a man's hands on her, a man's hard body against hers.

The prospect of being like all the other women in the world loomed before her. If a stranger could excite such feelings in her, she recognized her vulnerability. Far from being an unpleasant sensation, it had been breathtaking. A warmth painful in its pleasure had coursed through her. The sense of being part of someone so much bigger and stronger and therefore safe and protected had been there too.

Along with emotion. Tender feelings, longing, regret for what might have been.

Fortunately or unfortunately, her mind had swept away the illusion and confronted the reality. If she had consented, he would have taken her body and left her with nothing but the sense of how easily and cheaply she had given herself away.

She rose and paced the room. She had lived in these quarters only a few months. They still seemed unbelievably luxurious after what she had been accustomed to. Almost in wonder she trailed her fingers through the fringe on the fine lampshade. The Persian carpet cushioned her feet in the soft-soled satin house slippers. Her reflection cast a pale shadow in the polished mahogany of the sidetable.

So different. So warm and dry. So safe and respectable. Here was a haven. She had not sought this place, but now that she had it, nothing must take it away.

If the American from Texas or some other man were allowed to come too close, he might destroy this blessed comfort.

She dropped back into the wingchair and curled her feet up under her. Arms wrapped around her protectively, she vowed no man would touch her again. Better safe than sorry. If he did not kiss her nor put his hands on her, then she would be safe.

She had been taught a valuable lesson tonight, she told herself. She should learn from it. She had been made aware of her weakness. Now she must avoid anything that exposed it. Silently, she vowed to keep herself out of the hands of all men. They would not be able to seduce her if they could not touch her.

She finished the drink and set the cup in the saucer. The taste of chocolate sweetened with honey was one sensual pleasure. The feel of satin upholstery against her cheek was another. The warmth of the fire. All were sensual pleasures. She had only to look around her to count her blessings.

A man's kiss and his arms around her were sensual pleasures to be sure, but she need not have them all.

She closed her eyes and slipped away into slumber. Almost immediately the dream came. A man's strong arms wrapped around her body. A man's warm mouth promised heaven.

The driver of the blue Landau formally presented the letter from her stepmother. A quiver of unease prickled the skin on Duchess's arms. With real regret, she looked around her at the small, comfortable drawing room. It had been too good to last, she supposed. But how quickly she had grown used to the luxuries money could provide.

The driver had assumed a patient air of one prepared to wait until she could be driven to her destination. No use to postpone the inevitable. She folded the paper and returned it to the envelope. "I'll get my things."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your coming, er— Evelyn."

"I prefer Duchess, Lady Montague."

"Of course. And please call me Clarice."

A uniformed maid helped her out of her cloak and took her hat and umbrella. Duchess waited calmly though her heart was pounding and her chest felt tight.

Her stepmother's cheek felt cold when she touched it to Duchess's. Likewise, her fingers trembled. She was nervous, Duchess observed. And why not? She was confronting a woman only eight years younger than herself and infinitely wiser in years.

With a wordless gesture, Clarice indicated that Duchess should sit. She seated herself before the teatray. She bit her lips and clasped her hands in her lap. Indeed if it were possible that a woman could look older and at the same time younger, then Clarice had achieved that happy condition. Her hair was arranged in a new and becoming style with masses of curls on her forehead and at the nape of her neck. Her dress was the latest hunter green taffeta with a bitter green apron under black net. It was obviously the product of a London couturier rather than a country seamstress.

Duchess steeled herself for the announcement she was sure was forthcoming.

With shaking hands the baroness lifted the teapot, then hastily set it down when the lid vibrated.

Duchess's mouth twisted. Her stepmother obviously lacked the stomach for what she was about to say. At least she had taken the trouble to broach the news herself instead of leaving it to a minor clerk from the Montagues' solicitor.

Clarice looked at her helplessly. "I know I'm making a mess of this," she murmured, "but I don't know what to say."

Duchess pressed her lips together and breathed deeply. The inevitable could not be postponed any longer. "I quite understand if you no longer wish to continue the allowance."

"What! Oh, no. No." Clarice looked aghast. "Oh, no. My dear Duchess. Is that why you thought I had you brought here? To tell you that? Oh, no."

Duchess felt the tight knot in her stomach relax. Suddenly, she wanted a cup of tea very badly. Or something stronger to steady her nerves.

"Oh, no," Clarice hastened on. "In fact, quite the contrary."

The young woman seemed to gain strength from the reassurance. She lifted the pot and successfully poured the tea.

"I've come to tell you that Bethany and Juliet and I are leaving England." Clarice's hand suddenly began to shake again. The tea sloshed over the lip of the cup.

Duchess took it from her before she could spill it onto her lap.

"I don't know how to tell you. I—I suppose you know that Montague is dying."

Duchess's face remained impassive. "I had not heard. I assumed no news was good news."

"He cannot eat. Or at least he will not. There's nothing left of him but a skeleton. And he cannot move a muscle. Only his eyes. When I first visited him, he would try to speak to me. But I couldn't understand him. Now he looks at me as if he—hates me."

A moment passed. Duchess took a swallow of the tea. It was slightly bitter. She would have preferred it with sugar. She set it down delicately.

Clarice leaned forward, pleading for understanding. "Of course, it's out of the question for Bethany and Juliet to visit him."

"Of course." Though she knew she should not ask, Duchess could not contain her curiosity. "What do you tell them about their father?"

Clarice's mouth trembled. "That he's dead. The doctor says there is always hope. But I've demanded the truth. He tells me that under the circumstances, Montague is not likely to survive the year."

In the still room Duchess could imagine the ticking of a clock. She glanced down at her lapel watch. Time to bring this interview to a close. "Clarice, what do you want to tell me?"

"I've met a man."

Duchess's mouth dropped open. She stared down at the teacup with a bemused smile. What a coincidence! If she had taken a mouthful, she most assuredly would have choked.

Clarice pressed the handkerchief to her mouth. Her cheeks were scarlet with embarrassment. Her words poured out in a

defiant rush. "He works in the firm of Montague's solicitors. He came to deliver papers for me to sign. He stayed for tea."

Duchess smiled encouragingly.

Clarice rose. Hands clasped together in front of her, as she had rehearsed herself half a dozen times, she related the story. "He came with more papers. I begged him to stay for lunch. The girls took him to see their ponies."

"He sounds very nice."

"He is." She dropped back into the chair and reached for Duchess's hand. Her grip was tight, her fingers desperately cold. "Oh, I know what people will say. I can hardly believe I'm doing this. Sometimes I think I'm watching another person. But he's so kind. So good."

Her next admission was so low that Duchess had to strain to hear. "I wanted him to kiss me, to take my hand. I didn't want to hide from him. I was never afraid he would hurt me."

"The way Montague hurt you." It was not a question.

Clarice looked down at her lap. Quickly, she released Duchess's hand. "I have no excuse for what has happened between us. I don't care what people say. I won't create some fairy tale by saying that we were friends or that I turned to him out of grief. I turned to him because I was lonely and angry and so unhappy. At first he was kind and sympathetic. But then—"

"He saw a kind, beautiful lady in distress."

Clarice nodded slowly. "Certainly in distress."

"When he kissed you, you turned hot and cold and shivery all over," Duchess murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing." Duchess leaned forward, her smile encouraging. "So what do you want from me, Clarice?"

Lady Montague lifted her head. "I don't want anything from you. In fact, I want you to take it all."

Duchess frowned. "I don't understand what you mean."

"Take Montague's money. All of it."

"Bethany and Juliet—"

Clarice made a chopping motion with her hand. "Listen to me. Bartholomew is going to India. He's been offered a wonderful position there if he will emigrate. He has money of his own.

Quite a lot of it. And the company he's going with is wealthy. Their officers get fabulously rich in just a few years. He wants to marry me and adopt my children. We'll go to India together as a family. You're Montague's firstborn. His oldest daughter. You're all the family that he has in the world. You're entitled to his estate."

"I'm hardly entitled to anything. Montague is still alive," Duchess reminded her.

Rising, Clarice paced about the room twisting the handkerchief to tatters between her fists. "That's the worst of it." She spun around, her chin up defiantly. "I'm not going to wait."

"What?"

"Bart and I have decided. The captain will marry us on our first day at sea."

Duchess's eyes widened. "You'll have to swear that you have no impediments to your marriage."

Clarice paused at the window. The lace threw a shadow across her face. "Then I'll lie," she said simply. "I'll lie and Bart will say nothing. The sin will be mine if there is ever a question."

Sin. Duchess stared at her stepmother. *Always sin. The sins of the father.* All of them forced into the life they led. Forced by sin to sin again. Lady Clarice, a blameless, generous lady, taking the sins of adultery and bigamy upon her own conscience.

She realized Clarice sat with bowed head like a penitent waiting for the sentence to be pronounced. "You've obviously thought about this for a long time."

"All winter long." Clarice's smile was wan. As if Duchess's acceptance had been the assurance she needed, she drank her tea and selected a sinfully rich chocolate eclair. "I don't intend to say anything to anyone else about this. Bart is drawing up all the documents. They declare you Montague's only heir. The house, the lands, the money—"

"Clarice!"

"Don't say a word. Just listen. Everything is yours. I want no part of it. Never again. Live wherever you wish, however you wish. Turn it into an orphanage. Give it away to the poor. I don't care."

"Bethany and Juliet?"

"The best I can say for Montague was that he was in my bed when they were conceived. They've already forgotten him. He didn't come to see them more than half a dozen times a year. They love Bart." Clarice finished her tea. Her face was transfixed with relief and happiness. In that moment she was incredibly beautiful. "I love Bart. We're going in a month's time."

Duchess could only smile as her stepmother wiped a tiny smear of chocolate from the corner of the mouth. "Then please confer to him my congratulations on his excellent choice. I hope you'll both be very happy."

When she rose to go, Clarice pressed a small mahogany chest into her guests's hands. "This is yours."

Duchess looked down at it. The wood was satin smooth, the brass that bound it polished with a sheen that comes only when a thing is well loved and cared for. "What is it?"

Clarice smiled. "Your mother's jewelry."

Duchess's eyes widened. She shook her head. "You must know that I can't accept these. They belong to the wife of Montague. Not to me."

Clarice clasped her hands behind her, her eyes alight with pleasure. "But Montague doesn't have a wife. Not any longer. They belong to you. Perkins will drive you home."

Outside in the hall, Duchess tucked the case under her arm. She slid her free hand over the satiny top. She had not realized that wood could feel warm.

Chapter Five

Pictures at the Exhibition

"Dammit, Gill!"

Rowdy's outraged curse descended into a groan of agony as his loving cousin swept back the thick draperies the Ritz Hotel provided for its guests who cared to sleep late. The lace curtains beneath them let in the early afternoon light with excruciating brightness. Rowdy threw a shaking hand over his eyes and coughed once. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Fuzzy and foul-tasting. He grimaced.

"Here." Gill pressed a cup into his hand. "Don't scald yourself."

"You're killing me," Rowdy moaned.

Gill ignored his cousin's suffering. "Have to get you up and at 'em, so you'll be dressed and in a good mood for this evening."

Rowdy carefully lowered his hand and opened one bloodshot eye. "What's this evening?"

Gill smiled his sunniest, white-toothed smile. "The American consul got us invitations to the Tate Gallery. A Turner retrospective."

Rowdy's groans and protests would have wrung tears from a stone, but Gill hung his cousin's suit on the wardrobe door and urged him to drink his coffee.

* * *

"I'm afraid I don't understand it at all." Ivory sniffed as she consulted her program for illuminating notes on *Snowstorm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*.

"It's all color and movement," Duchess said softly. With shining eyes she stared into the whirling mass of snow, waves, and smoke with the paddlewheel at its center. Then she bit her lip and looked around nervously. How could she, who had never seen a painting before, much less been to the vaunted Tate Gallery, dare to express such an opinion?

Ivory looked over her spectacles again, then found the description in the program. After a moment's pause, she read. "You're absolutely right, my dear. ' . . . representation of color and light and dynamic movement at the expense of realistic rendering.'" She lowered the program and tilted her head to look again at the painting. "I do agree about the absence of realistic rendering. Give me a Constable anytime. Now there was a painter."

She slipped her hand around Duchess's arm and moved her on. Around her, acquaintances nodded and smiled. A couple of young men cast appreciative glances at Duchess. "I knew this was the very place for you to come," Ivory confided as she smiled approvingly in their directions. "See. You are totally unexceptionable."

"They haven't met me yet," Duchess replied.

"When they will, they will accept you without question. Especially now that you've been among them. Have confidence, my girl. That's what society is all about."

Still, Duchess looked around her nervously. Only for a few seconds in front of each painting had she stopped being fearful that someone would denounce her. She touched her gloved hand to her throat. Her mother's gold brooch set with lustrous pearls was safely in place. Pear-shaped pearls, part of the same parure, swung gently from the lobes of her ears.

With trepidation she had approached the finer dresses department of Harrod's. The saleslady had gone into ecstasies over the figure her customer cut in the walking suit of cream wool

flannel elaborately trimmed with military braid. Beneath a matching wool toque, Duchess's dark hair and eyes presented a rich contrast. Even now she looked around her, unsure as to whether her choice had been correct. Most of the other women wore the darker colors—hunters green, maroon, brown, and black. Of course, most of them were blondes.

"The American ambassador and his party." Avory nudged Duchess from her reverie. "Peabody's his name. He's a good choice. A good old family from Boston. A sportsman. Dudley approves of him." She chuckled. "He must be a dead bore."

Avory's son was already stepping forward to greet the portly gentleman who smiled delightedly at the sight of the baronet. More than a dozen people made up the American party. In the way of Americans, they either carried themselves stiffly, afraid of making a mistake, or they adopted an artificial casualness to cover their awe of British nobility.

Duchess tore her eyes away from the shifting light of *Rain, Steam, and Speed*.

"My mother, Mrs. Avory Shires." Dudley was making introductions, a sour pickle expression on his face. "And her companion—er—cousin, that is, friend." He fumbled to a halt and took a deep breath. "Miss Evelyn Smythe."

"I'm so pleased to meet you." The ambassador's wife extended her hand to Avory. "I've heard so much about you and your work for the women's cause. You must tell me all about everything you've done."

Duchess fixed a pleasant smile on her face and let her eyes roam over the group. Suddenly, she froze. Looming up in the rear, head and shoulders over all the people in front of him, his red hair shining like a beacon, was the American from Texas.

Duchess ducked her head and raised a trembling hand to her temple. Hot color rushed into her cheeks. Her breath caught. Of all the bad luck. Of all the men in England, in the world, how did he come to be at her very first appearance in society? The man who believed awful things about her. The man who had shamefully offered her three hundred dollars and a new dress. The only man who had ever kissed her.

Ambassador Peabody was introducing his party. With especial pleasure he presented his two visitors, prominent American landowners who had come from nearly halfway round the world.

Gill Sandoval bowed low over Duchess's hand. His dark eyes glinted with interest. "Charmed," he drawled, smiling broadly. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

"Thank you." Duchess hardly heard what he was saying. Her eyes were glazed. She wished herself invisible. She tucked her chin into her chest. Her only hope was that the ambassador's party would think she was painfully shy and leave her alone.

Gill stepped back.

A big hand, an enormous hand, slipped under hers. Long warm fingers curled over hers. She could see the fine sprinkling of dark red hair against creamy skin that would not take a tan. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

She would have known the deep voice anywhere. The drawl was more pronounced. It sent shivers down her spine. She nodded and murmured something so soft that he couldn't quite catch it. By that she ruined herself. Instead of leaving her alone, he stooped.

Their eyes met. His were blue, but a different shade. In a land of blue-eyed people, his were turquoise. They gazed into her own.

At first they were puzzled. She could almost see the questions churning behind them. *Don't I know you? Haven't we met before? You look so familiar.* A frown creased his forehead. Then the turquoise eyes widened. Slowly the high forehead smoothed. The incredible eyes narrowed. The chiseled mouth spread in a grin. The hand tightened.

"Well, well. I sure am pleased to meet you, ma'am. Miss—er—Smythe, is it? Is that with a y and an e?"

She was living a nightmare. When she tried to free her hand, he held it tightly and tucked it over his arm. To the amazement of his cousin and the surprise of Dudley and Ivory, he smiled blindingly. "I'm just a country boy," he drawled in that maddening exaggerated way. "I don't understand all these pictures." He pronounced the word as if it were a vessel to pour milk from.

"I sure would appreciate your telling me what I'm supposed to see."

Avory recovered herself and smiled archly at her son. "Oh, Evelyn will be happy to explain them to you. She has a real affinity for Turner's works. She was explaining them to me."

Rowdy nodded in agreement. "I just knew she'd be the one."

Everyone was watching her. She could not twist her hand away. He strolled forward, pulling her with him. She made one more weak effort. "Wouldn't you'd be happier with one of the gallery guides?"

"Now why would I want an old man, when I can have you?" His sentence was packed with meaning for her ears only. He cocked a dark red eyebrow. She began to develop a virulent dislike for red hair as he towed her away from the group to take up a position in front of the next painting. His head bent low. She could feel his breath against her ear. "I can have you, can't I?"

She swallowed hard.

"To explain about the paintings," he added.

With shakings hands she opened her catalog. "This is *The Fighting Temeraire*. It's from Turner's earlier period."

"Uh-huh."

She raised her shoulder toward his chin. Her effort to push him away met with a soft chuckle. He was easily the most hateful creature she had ever known. "It's considered one of his most romantic works."

"Romantic." The word had caught his attention. He raised his head. "Is that so?" He tipped his head away from her and studied the work before him. "Romantic?"

She studied the painting. The great old warship, like a white ghost, its skeleton masts bare of sails, was being towed away by a dark tugboat belching fire from its smokestack. Turner's glistening use of fire and water worked its magic on her. "Oh, yes," she insisted. "It's very Romantic."

The turquoise eyes searched her face. "I don't see how you get any love out of that."

She shook her head. Again she called upon the superior education paid for in compensation for the home and family

she had been deprived of. "Love between people is only one part of Romance. There's more." She read to him from the description of the ships. "'The *Temeraire* represents the old values of patriotism and heroism and glory in battle.' The Romantic poets were very patriotic."

The others had caught up with them and now they listened to her.

"The old ship is going to be destroyed, and the sad thing is that she's being towed away by an ugly black steamboat." Incensed by her own analysis, she looked at Rowdy. "Don't you see? It's disrespectful. It's a shame. She won great and glorious victories for the nation."

"I see a worn-out old wreck," he teased. "You see a hero."

Embarrassed by her passionate outburst, she turned back to the painting. Her chin was a little higher. "Perhaps you'd better engage the gallery guide after all."

"Hey." He patted her hand. "Don't go all stiff on me. I see what you're saying, now that you've explained it to me. I was just teasing."

"Rowdy doesn't have a serious bone in his body, Miss Smythe." Gill came up on her other side and offered her his arm. "Don't take him seriously. In fact, don't take him at all. Take me instead. I'm the serious one." His expression sober as a judge's, he stared at the Turner. "Yes. Yes. I see everything. The ship is you, beautiful, graceful, proud, being dragged off by a big, ugly—"

General laughter broke off his analysis.

"One more word, cousin," Rowdy threatened, "and you can walk back to San Antone."

"Young men," Ivory cried. "Don't pull her apart."

Duchess could not keep the smile off her face. Quite suddenly, instead of being annoyed, she was enjoying being the center of attention between two handsome young men. In the grip of such a heady sensation, she laughed.

Gill laughed too, but Rowdy frowned and tried to pull her away. "What about the next picture?"

Now, to his chagrin, the group moved with them, content to follow the three beautiful young people and listen to Duchess's

analysis of Turner's paintings. Even more entrancing was the teasing and innocent flirting. Gill set himself to vie with Rowdy on every turn. Ivory was elated. Duchess was a success beyond her wildest dreams. Who would have thought she would take so quickly?

At the end of the room, the ambassador and his wife led the way into a reception area, where refreshments were to be served. Gill offered his arm to the ambassador's niece. When Duchess would have disengaged herself, Rowdy held her tightly. "What's the story on you?"

She pushed at his hand. "Nothing that should concern you. Let me go."

He smiled. "Now why would I do that? You'd disappear and I might never see you again."

"That would be best for both of us."

He shook his head. "Not for a pretty girl like you and a fine fellow like me. That'd be a real waste. Promise to have dinner with me."

"Have you lost your mind?"

He leaned toward her, his smile brilliant, his voice a caress. "Promise and I'll let you go."

She had to admit she was tempted. The red hair had become more tolerable. He was charming and witty. If he were not so overbearing. "No. It's not possible."

He regarded her shrewdly. "Do these people know you run around in rags in the middle of the night and pick people's pockets?"

She could feel color draining from her cheeks. She looked around quickly to see if anyone had heard. The others had gone to the far end of the reception room, where they were helping themselves to the buffet. "I didn't pick your pocket."

"Aha! They don't know," he guessed. "A word or two from me and you'd be way back in the doghouse."

Fear and anger cast out all her cordial feelings toward him. "Blackmail is a crime, sir."

"So are robbery and prostitution."

Her breath hissed out between her teeth. "I am not a prostitute."

"Then come to dinner with me. Tell me all about yourself. I'll believe you. We can start from there."

He actually seemed to be enjoying the conversation. He was smiling equably. He even nodded to Avory, who waved to them from the buffet table. Why should he not enjoy it? He had nothing at risk. She clenched her fists.

"No."

"Mrs. Shires . . ."

He was going to call them all over and denounce her. Not only would she be ruined, but Avory and Dudley would be embarrassed. The ambassador's party was made up of many important people. The news would spread. "All right."

"What is it, young man?" Avory trotted over to them bearing a plate of delicacies from the table.

"I was just asking Miss Smythe to have dinner with me. She said I'd have to ask you." Rowdy smiled ingratiatingly. "She's been so good to explain all the pictures to me, I thought she could tell me more about London. Then maybe we could all go sightseeing together later on."

Avory looked from one to the other. Duchess forced a smile on her face. "I think that would be acceptable, young man."

"Great," Rowdy exclaimed. "I'll call for you tomorrow evening. Where can I pick you up?"

Duchess's eyes narrowed. "I'll meet you."

He frowned, but Avory interceded. "That would be best, Mr. MacPherson. That way Evelyn may have the use of the carriage."

His brows drew together, but Duchess broke off the conversation. "Send a note to Mrs. Shires's home. Shall we say eight?"

A muscle flicked in Rowdy's cheek, but he nodded graciously. "Eight it is."

"I'm hungry now." Duchess freed her arm and left her tormentor standing in the archway. Even in the buffet line, she was conscious of his eyes following her. He was a horrible

man. As she selected a tablespoon of jelly, she vowed she would not keep the appointment.

Lord Cheviot stood poised in the door of the American ambassador's reception. He cut an elegant figure, slender, groomed from top to toe, dressed in the very best haberdashery money could buy. So still did he stand, his eyes searching the faces of the guests, that he appeared cut from stone. A servant took his silk top hat, gloves, and walking stick. Still he hesitated, scanning the faces. Only when he found the ones he sought did he relax.

At the sight of Guillermo Sandoval, he allowed his mouth to stretch into a generous smile. His half crown to the doorman at the Ritz had been well spent. He strolled across the room.

Gill held a crystal cup of pink tea while he listened quietly to the animated conversation of a very pretty blond girl. When she said something amusing, he smiled and nodded. As he lifted the tea to his lips, Gill saw the viscount approaching. Instantly, he straightened.

Then the man extended his hand. "Gill. The very one I've been looking for. Good to see you out and about this evening."

Gill set the cup down on his plate and shook hands. "I could say the same for you, Cheviot. After last night."

The blond girl was looking appreciatively at the handsome Englishman, half a head taller than the dark, foreign-looking Gill. She was doomed to disappointment, however, for when the introductions were complete, Cheviot begged her pardon and led Gill aside.

"I was hoping to find you. You left before we had completed our business last night."

Gill frowned. *The business had been gambling.*

"Your cousin told me early on that he would like to see the Audley herd."

Over the viscount's shoulder, Gill saw Rowdy approaching with the lovely Evelyn Smythe on his arm. Behind them came Mrs. Shires and her son Dudley. "Maybe you ought to tell

Rowdy what you've got in mind," Gill suggested. "He's feeling a lot better than he was last night."

Cheviot pivoted. His perfect teeth dazzled the crowd. "Rowdy. Good to see you."

Rowdy's look of surprise flashed only momentarily. Then he nodded slowly. "Cheviot."

"I'm so glad I've found you. I've come to invite you and your cousin down to Audley for the weekend."

Rowdy's brow quirked. In his mind a voice whispered that more was going on than met the eye. He wanted a look at the herd, but he didn't intend to be stampeded into buying them. Likewise, if they were what he needed, he didn't want to appear too eager. The price might be higher than he could afford to pay. He smiled slowly before he patted Duchess's hand. "I'd like to have taken you up on that, Cheviot, but I've just made a date with Miss Smythe here to take her to dinner tomorrow evening."

Duchess gasped and tugged at his sleeve. "I'm happy to release you from your appointment, Mr. MacPherson."

He grinned down at her. "Of course you are. I wouldn't expect anything else from a perfect lady like yourself. But my maw raised me to be a gentleman. I'm—"

She shook her head as she tried to disengage herself from his side. "Oh, but I insist." She smiled encouragingly at the viscount. "I couldn't allow Mr. MacPherson to miss the glories of a weekend in the English countryside."

Rowdy managed to cover both her hands with his own. "I know my manners, ma'am. I've asked you. You've accepted."

She glared at him. He smiled at her.

The viscount had smoothed the anger from his face. "Then we don't have a problem, Rowdy. Miss Smythe is included in the invitation."

"Not without a chaperone," Mrs. Shires interrupted the proceedings.

Cheviot's mouth worked as he recognized Ivory Shires, suffragette and crusader for the rights of women. Her son the Honorable Dudley Shires was a dead bore. He thought about the sale of the cattle and managed to keep his smile pasted on.

"Then you, too, are invited, my dear lady. And you, Dudley, old man. Always plenty of room in the countryhouse. It'll be quite like old times. Pater will be so sorry he missed it. In Italy, you know."

While Dudley accepted with equal amounts of surprise and delight, the old lady measured him over her amber-tinted glasses. "I'll be delighted, young man. A weekend in the country will be so enjoyable for Evelyn."

Chapter Six

A Weekend in the Country

Rowdy MacPherson was the most maddening man Duchess had ever had to deal with. Considering that he was the first man she had ever had to deal with on a social plane, she wondered if they all behaved as if they had the right to order people to do their bidding and carve up the world to suit themselves.

Not only had he blackmailed her into going along for the explicit purpose of tormenting her, but he had taken upon himself the assignment of the seats in the three coaches. Instead of riding with Mrs. Shires, her son, and her daughter-in-law, she had practically been dragged into the coach with Rowdy MacPherson and Francis, Viscount Cheviot. Only Rowdy was pleased about the arrangement. She had spent the first several miles glaring at him, while the viscount regarded her from beneath drooping lids as if she were an intruder.

Now, as she stared moodily out the window at the gray sky and green countryside, she was uncomfortably aware of Rowdy's long form beside her. He was such a large man that he quite overwhelmed her in the confines of the coach. His legs seemed to stretch out for miles. The fine gray wool of his trousers stretched tight over his horseman's thighs. If she did

not sit up very straight, the sway of the coach would brush her against him.

Moreover, the deep voice so close beside her set sympathetic chords to vibrating through her nerves. With every breath she drew, she inhaled the clean light smell of his shaving lotion. The biting cold of the day made her agonizingly aware of the heat of his body. Her muscles strung tighter and tighter. Her cheeks felt so hot, she was sure she was blushing.

The host had insisted on riding backward to give his guests a first view of the English countryside, which he began to extol as they crossed the boundaries to Audley lands. His travelogue led into a serious discussion of the virtues of the Audley herd and how it would enrich the pitiful and inferior cattle that Rowdy raised in Texas.

The conversation should have had little meaning for Duchess, apart from the spots of angry color she observed rising on Rowdy's cheekbones. Despite her lack of knowledge, she found herself interested as the Texan began a spirited defense of his own herds. Warming to his subject, he sketched some of his plans for introducing certain characteristics through selective purchasing in England. Duchess gave him her grudging respect. He was not just a playboy and gambler, but a serious young man on a mission.

The coach tooled round the brow of a hill, and before they could begin a gentle descent through a forest, the viscount struck the top of the coach with his walking stick. The coachman pulled the horses for the passengers to alight. Across the valley stood Audley, a stately home of pale sandstone and brick, glowing like a rich jewel in a field of green.

"My home," the viscount said simply.

"No wonder you're so proud of it. That's one hell of a spread," Rowdy proclaimed reverently.

"It is indeed," his host replied. "One hell of a spread." A few more sentences about the history and ancestry and they all climbed back into their vehicles to swiftly descend through a forest of oak.

* * *

Lord Mainbrace, the prize bull of Audley's herd, thrust out his glistening muzzle and bellowed. Uneasily, the men tightened their holds on the chains attached to the ring in his nose. Massive shoulders flexing, tail switching, he showed his further displeasure by pawing the turf with hooves the size of dinnerplates. Great clumps of grass flew over his shoulders.

"The pater's pride and joy." Cheviot's eyes never left Rowdy's face. "What do you say, MacPherson? Bloodlines like that are worth a fortune."

The bull bellowed again. Then he lowered his white head and hooked from side to side with his eight-inch down-curving horns. He tossed another great clump of sod into the air. His handlers tried to tighten the chain, but perhaps the huge Hereford did not feel the pain. He took a couple of steps forward, dragging them with him.

Standing at a good distance, Duchess watched Rowdy walk toward the massive creature, studying every aspect.

Cheviot looked alarmed. "Perhaps you ought to step back there."

"I'm watching it." Both Rowdy and his cousin walked slowly round the animal, taking in every aspect of its confirmation. "He's sure something." The Texan's eyes measured and calculated as he moved around to the beast's side.

"You'll find no truer breed in England," Cheviot called. He closed his eyes for an instant as if trying to remember. "Er—Herefords are great grazers. They fatten fast. I understand you've got mostly grasslands."

"That's true." Rowdy walked slowly to the back of the animal. The hindquarters were like a pair of great red and white tree trunks. "But we ship now mostly to grain farms, where they fatten the herd before they sell to the stockyards."

"No more cattle drives?" Cheviot looked disappointed.

"Oh, we have cattle drives. And roundups. And all the other stuff," Rowdy explained. "But the cattle drives are just to the railheads or the farms." He stared at the hindquarters. Lord

Mainbrace stood more than five feet high with massive haunches. Again he bellowed and another clod of earth flew up into the air. His wavy red coat shone in the failing western sunlight.

When Rowdy made no comment, Cheviot frowned. "He's what you need," he insisted. "Or at least a young bull from his seed." He turned to Duchess and Mrs. Shires, who had come down to watch the presentation. "Your pardon, ladies."

Avory nodded. Duchess tucked her hands into her bronze velvet muff. Rowdy had suggested that everyone come down and see the beast. While Dudley and his wife had declined, the party was still large enough to maintain the air of a society outing.

The bull bellowed again, a deep-voiced roar with all the power of his massive lungs. The Texans contemplated him silently.

At last Cheviot prompted impatiently. "Seen enough? It's getting cold out here."

Rowdy nodded. He left the bull and bowed before the ladies. "I sure am sorry about keeping you standing around in the cold." He offered his arm to Avory, who smiled cheerily.

"Nonsense. It was wonderful to see such a magnificent specimen. Women are so seldom invited to see animals like that. And they are the creatures that feed the country. No woman should be kept in the dark about such things."

Rowdy smiled down at her. "The women in my family would sure agree with you. They've rounded up cattle and ridden horses for generations."

Gill held his arm out for Duchess. She smiled gratefully at him. "Are you chilled to the bone and bored to boot?" he asked.

Her first impulse was to say yes loudly enough for Rowdy to hear, but she found herself agreeing with Avory. "Not a bit. I've never been outside London before. This is all wonderful and amazing to me."

Rowdy whipped his head around. "You've never been in the country before?"

She was startled by the pity and concern in his voice. "N-no."

He shook his head as if he could not believe his ears. His expression was deadly serious. "Then I'm sure glad to be the one to show it to you."

A light tap on Duchess's door froze her in the act of brushing her hair. Without a doubt Rowdy MacPherson had come calling. She made a moue of disgust at her reflection in the mirror. She should have expected no less. But his solicitude during the meal, his insistence that the house party remain together rather than splitting up into two groups so that Clarence DeCamp could play poker with the men, his entertaining stories about life in Texas all had lulled her into a feeling of good fellowship. She was almost on the point of enjoying herself.

The knock came again. Icy prickles raced up and down her spine. She could refuse to answer. She *should* refuse to answer it. She looked at the door. No key in the lock. He could open the door and enter. Then she would have to scream and the resulting scandal would be embarrassing to everyone concerned.

Heaving a sigh of pure disgust, she stalked to the door. Very carefully, she opened it no more than an inch.

He smiled. "Is everything all right?"

She raised her eyebrows. "It was."

Bracing one hand on the doorjamb, he lowered his head and stared at the floor for several seconds. "I'm sorry that you're not enjoying yourself."

She opened the door another inch. "Why would you think I would be? After all, I didn't want to come."

"I know that," he agreed. "But I thought you'd have a good time when you got here. And I'd have a chance to get to know you better. Maybe you'd get to know me and think I wasn't such a bad fellow after all."

She shrugged and opened the door a little wider. Should she admit that she could see several good points in his favor? "I'm having a fine time."

He raised his head. "This weekend isn't the way I pictured it."

"How did you picture it?" she asked curiously.

"Oh, like Charles Dickens. You know. Riding around the countryside like the Pickwick Club."

She could not conceal her amazement. "You've read *The Pickwick Papers*?"

He looked offended. "I do know how to read, ma'am."

She opened the door even wider. "I'm sorry. I know you do. I mean, I took it for granted that you did. I mean, you're obviously very intelligent, well born. It's just that I never expected an American to—"

He reared back to rock on his bootheels, thumbs hooked in his vestpockets. "Sittin' 'round the campfire, when the Injuns are all run off . . ."

She stepped through into the hall with her best smile. "I'm sorry. I've insulted you and I never meant to."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I just wanted you to know that the hunting party wasn't my idea either."

"I'm sure it wasn't. DeCamp was the one who wanted it."

He braced his arm against the door jamb again. Instantly, she was on her guard. Again the overpowering height and strength pressed itself on her. He must have outweighed her by more than a hundred pounds. Funny how that thought no longer frightened her. Instead, it made her feel excited.

"I don't know why Cheviot doesn't tell him to go suck an egg," Rowdy said grimly. "Nobody wanted to do that. But we're going to do it."

She watched him, thinking how disgusted he was that he had not been in control of the situation. Without realizing it, her mouth curved in a smile.

He saw it. "What's so funny?"

She could feel the blush rising in her cheeks again. "Nothing really."

"There is. You're thinking something funny. Is it about me? Something I said?" He hunched his shoulders. His face was even closer to hers. The amazing turquoise eyes searched her face, trying to read her thoughts.

His craggy features were as handsome as any man's she had ever seen. Stretched over the sculpted bones, the pale golden

skin with its tracing of blued veins at the temples was the true redhead's color. A shock of dark red hair drooped over the forehead. She could push it back if she wanted to, touch her hand to his cheek *if she wanted to*. Her fingers tingled. Her palm itched. "I'd better say good night."

He looked down into her eyes. "You want to touch me."

She clenched her fist. "No."

He smiled, a sweet smile. Not a teasing one. "Yes, you do. You want to touch me. Go ahead. I promise I won't bite."

She should go into her room, she thought, and shut the door and push the chair under the doorknob.

"Go ahead," the temptor whispered. "This is your weekend for firsts."

Her fingers unclenched. Why were they trembling? They should have been steady. She was merely satisfying her curiosity. Nothing more. She hesitated.

He smiled.

She touched his cheek. It was warm and satiny across the cheekbone. Still trembling, she trailed her fingertips down into the faint roughness caused by his beard.

He sighed. His eyes were shining.

"I . . ." She did not know what she wanted to say. Something. But how did one tell a man that just the touch of him was unsettling her to the degree that she had to muster all her strength of will to keep from slumping against the door?

He put his big hand over hers and curved her palm around his mouth. His lips moved in the heart of her hand.

She gasped and jerked back as if she had touched fire. Stunned, she stared at him.

He nodded and straightened. Softly, he held the door for her. "Go to bed, Duchess. And when you sleep, dream about me."

Downstairs in the library, Clarence scowled as he watched Gill set a glass of port down untouched. He reared back in his chair, planting one booted foot on the fender in front of the fireplace. "Americans think they're such great sportsmen. But when the game's afoot, I've found they don't have the stomach."

"Not all Americans are great sportsmen," Gill replied mildly. Recognizing belligerence when he heard it, he directed his attention to a huge globe mounted in one corner.

"They brag and brag about how they hunt," Clarence continued. "They tell wild lies about life on the frontier. But most of them can't hit a deer standing still in the meadow. Terrible shots."

Gill placed his finger on Texas, thinking how he wished he could be there at that moment. "Rowdy's a good shot. I'm only fair."

Clarence lifted the glass to check the level of its contents. "By whose standards is he a good shot? By yours? And you admit you're only fair."

Gill heaved a sigh. Many more days of Clarence DeCamp and he might commit murder. "Just fair," he repeated.

"Oh, you're too modest, I'm sure." Cheviot entered in time to catch the end of the conversation. "All the preparations are taken care of. We'll have it tomorrow at dawn. Actually, not at dawn. But at a civilized hour in the morning. Do you think that will be agreeable with Rowdy?"

Gill was tempted to say that both he and Rowdy would prefer to forget the whole thing, but that would start another argument with DeCamp. For all he knew, they did this every weekend. Still he made a half effort. "I hope you didn't go to a lot of trouble for us. Rowdy and I didn't come equipped to hunt. We've got our pistols, but no rifles or shotguns. Whatever you fellows want to do, go right ahead. We can sit it out."

"Nonsense." DeCamp's voice was too loud. "Have to have enough to make a sporting event. That idiot Dudley's refused. Member of the Humane Society. Wouldn't you know he'd be one of those? A dead bore. No, Pater Audley's got every firearm known to man. He's been collecting for years. Soldier in the Crimea and all that."

"And his passion, next to his herd, is hunting," Cheviot agreed. He looked with interest at Gill. "You actually brought your pistol? How barbaric! Is it a Colt .45? I've heard a dab

about the American gun. Giant of a thing, so they say. I'd love to see it."

Gill wished he had not mentioned the pistols. He had a mental picture of his host brandishing a six-gun in one hand and a brandy in the other.

Clarence lifted his feet off the fender and poured them another round. "Drink up!" he commanded, toasting again. "When the days go raw, there's nothing like liquid warmth to make the body right."

"I don't like the looks of the herd." Rowdy's eyes met his cousin's in the shaving mirror. "That bull's a beauty, but according to the herdbook, he's producing way too many dwarves."

"Then let's hightail it out of here." Dressed except for his coat, Gill leaned against the bathroom wall while Rowdy bent to splash bay rum on his freshly shaven cheeks. "I don't like the looks of anything around here."

Rowdy reached for a towel and dried his hands. "You haven't liked this from the very beginning."

"Damn right. If we want to buy from these people, we ought to wait until the boss gets back from wherever he is. You've said Cheviot barely knows a horse from a cow. All he and DeCamp want is our money."

Rowdy grinned. "They haven't got it yet."

"No, but he'll keep trying so long as we're in his vicinity. What'll you bet? First drop out of the bucket in the morning, it'll be some sort of wager that they get more deer than we do—with our gunsights fixed to shoot ten feet high."

Rowdy ran his brushes over his hair in a vain attempt to smooth it down. "Tell you what, Cousin. We'll do the shooting in the morning or whatever time they manage to roll out of the sack. We'll have our bags packed and leave as soon as the hunt's over. I'll pass the word to Dudley Shires. He's been ready since they mentioned killing animals."

"It's a deal."

"I say, MacPherson, let's make it interesting. A hundred says I make the first kill." DeCamp sighted along the top of the triple barrel sporting gun.

Gill signaled his cousin with a what-did-I-tell-you look which the other ignored.

Rowdy carefully studied the identical sporting gun he held in his hands. "I'm not real sure what I'm supposed to be shooting with this," he mused. "What the hell is it?"

Cheviot giggled. "I can't believe they don't have these in Texas. You should get you and your cousin a pair and take them back. They're marvels of efficiency."

Gill hefted his. "Must weigh more than twenty pounds."

"Well, rather. It shoots ten-gauge shot from the upper two barrels. The bottom is rifled for a bullet."

"So you all tote around guns that weigh upwards of thirty pounds?" Rowdy looked incredulous. "That's more than twenty percent of what you weigh. You must not *hunt* with these things."

"The game is driven to them, Rowdy," Gill interjected softly.

"Well, why in the hell do they call it hunting then? They don't hunt for anything."

"Make the kill," Clarence sneered. "Then you'll see where the sport is. You'll soon shut your mouth."

"It's true, Rowdy." Gill lifted the gun and sighted along it. "Just figure out how to draw down on something with a rifle barrel a couple of inches below the bead."

Rowdy snorted. He lifted the monster to his shoulder and tried to imagine adjusting his sight. His shoulder already ached as he anticipated the recoil from a ten-gauge shell.

They stood on the edge of a meadow surrounded on all sides by an upward slope to a thick forest. The sun had not yet broken over the trees, so the entire scene was in blue shadow. Steam rose from a pool at one end. The place was a trap.

"How do you hunt in America?" Cheviot inquired as he sighted along his gun.

Gill cradled his heavy weapon in the crook of his arm. He

had already decided that he had no intention of firing anything but the rifle. Unless he was very lucky, he was pretty sure he would miss. "We ride twenty or thirty miles into the back country, make camp, and then hunt till we find a game trail. Then we either hunt the deer down or climb a tree and wait for it to come by. To us 'to hunt' means 'to look for.'"

"Sounds long and tiring and most uncivilized," came the bored rejoinder.

"When you've got to live off what you kill, it's not sport. It's necessity," Rowdy told him.

"And what types of guns do you use?"

"Light ones," Gill interjected promptly. "Rifles and shotguns. Sharps and Winchesters. All-purpose firearms." The English sportsman's need for bearers, wardens, and beaters became obvious in just the short time he had held the thing. He shifted the big sporting gun to his other hand and flexed his shoulder.

Cheviot looked blank. DeCamp merely looked bored. "So you've no sporting blood. I might have known. How about fifty?"

"You're on." A daredevil light in his eyes, Rowdy lifted the big gun to his shoulder.

In the distance they could hear the sounds of sticks being rattled together. A hound bayed far off.

"Tell your cousin not to keep betting." Cheviot put his lips close to Gill's ear.

Gill shrugged. "Rowdy's got his own money."

"Not if Clarence keeps taking it from him."

Midday was raw and cold—the sky a bruised gray with no hint of sun. A fine mist settled on their clothing, gradually soaking through their many caped coats. Their ears were numb even with deerstalker caps pulled down around them.

Another herd of deer broke from the woodlands. Slender legs a blur, they raced across the meadow. The thunder of Rowdy's gun only drove them faster. A second later the gambler's spoke, but they had sprung up the slope and vanished into the trees.

"Damn!" the Englishman roared. "That was your fault, MacPherson. If you can't shoot straight, don't panic them for someone who can. I claim the fifty."

"Not on your life." Rowdy smiled thinly. "Neither one of us gets the money. We'll just wait until the next go-round."

"Let's call it a day," Gill suggested at Rowdy's shoulder.

"No!"

"No!"

Both men glared at each other.

"I'm cold," Cheviot complained. "It's just as I knew it would be. I'm frozen to my knees. Let's call it off."

DeCamp looked murderous. At fifty dollars a bet, he had only managed to accumulate a little over a thousand dollars. He needed much, much more. He glared at his shivering host.

Rowdy winked wickedly at Gill. "How's about we cut out this penny-ante stuff, Decamp? Double or nothing on the next time. Make it interesting. Then we'll all go in and get warm."

The gambler's eyes gleamed. A couple of thousand was more like it. It could be parlayed into more over cards tonight. "Done."

"Double or nothing," Cheviot objected. "For heaven's sake, Clarence—"

DeCamp rounded on him. "Shut up, you idiot. You and your new friend"—his mouth curled in a sneer—"move back to the carriage. We can do without your distractions."

"But that's nearly five hundred pounds," Cheviot protested.

"Right." The gambler licked his lips.

Cheviot looked wildly around him, but Gill was already moving away. With a shake of his head, the viscount joined him.

Gill folded his arms across his chest. His black eyes surveyed the entire meadow as well as Rowdy and Clarence crouched in the blind. Then he could not hold his peace in the face of Cheviot's discomfiture. "Why'd you let that fellow run roughshod over you?"

The viscount sighed. "It's just the way of things."

Gill looked around him and snorted. "You've got plenty here. Why don't you just tell him to get lost?"

"Suffice it to say, it's not just the money."

Gill was silent for a moment. Then he nodded. "Blackmailing you. So what," Gill scoffed. "Hell. Seems to me your father'd believe you before he'd believe him."

The hounds began to bay again. In the blind below, Rowdy steadied the big gun against his shoulder, sighting carefully. His finger caressed the trigger of the rifle barrel. Gill watched his cousin's stillness. A slow smile curved his lips. *Steady, Rowdy. Steady.*

In the distance the clacking of the beaters' sticks came closer. The hunters looked to their weapons. Clarence cast Rowdy a quick glance. His lips curved upward in a sneer. His own blood pounded in his veins. Five hundred pounds.

A noble stag with an impressive rack of antlers bounded out of the thicket. As if blinded by the light, it froze for a second. Head upraised, ears flicking back and forward, nostrils dilating to sift the breezes, it stood as if carved from stone.

Rowdy was ready. His sight adjusted to compensate for the elevation, he let out his breath in a slow slide and squeezed the trigger. The heavy shot caught the deer in the shoulder just beneath the blade and slammed into the heart. The force knocked the animal to the ground. It never moved again.

"Eeeee-haw!" Gill jerked off his cap and tossed it into the air.

From the blind beside the Texan, DeCamp's howl of anger could not drown the rebel yell.

"Oh, well shot!" Cheviot exclaimed.

Gill grinned and clapped the viscount on the back. "Just average. It took him a while to get the damn thing sighted in."

Rowdy and DeCamp stepped out of the blinds. The gambler still held his gun. Although the muzzle was lowered, it was not lowered much. "You tricked me."

Rowdy grinned hugely. "I sure did, old son. I tossed out that line and reeled you in just like a big old fish. Just like you've been tricking me all day long with this gun."

The weapon quivered. The barrels rose.

Wardens and bearers, Gill and Cheviot froze.

"Damn you!" DeCamp's face was red as fire. Sweat from his forehead trickled into his eyes. "You cheated me!"

"Not hardly." Rowdy raised his own gun. Both shotgun rounds were still loaded. "I just played you for a sucker. You know all about being played for a sucker. You've done it yourself. How does it feel?"

Death and hell looked out of DeCamp's face.

"Here now." Cheviot stepped forward. "All's in sport. And he won fair and square, Clarence."

"Shut up!"

"Better listen to him, DeCamp," Gill called. "A man doesn't get up after a shotgun blast."

DeCamp's hands tightened on the gun.

Rowdy did not move. His eyes never left the gambler's. "Make your best play."

"Clarence!" Cheviot pleaded.

DeCamp stared into the Texan's face. Beneath the handsome boyishness was a layer of steel and a will to keep a promise. His body shivered as if it had just stepped back from the edge of precipice. Slowly, he lowered the gun.

"Good idea."

The Audley warden hurried forward and all but jerked both weapons out of the men's hands. One by one, he opened the chambers and unloaded them.

"Everybody to the house," Cheviot called nervously.

When DeCamp would have stalked off, Rowdy blocked his way. "Let's just call it five hundred even."

The man's face was white and red by turns, but he nodded curtly. "Within the week."

"Stay a minute, MacPherson."

Rowdy raised one dark eyebrow interrogatively. The members of the house party were set to depart. The coaches had been brought round. He and Gill stopped at the foot of the staircase when Cheviot called from the parlor.

His cousin exchanged a glance with him. "Keep it short, *primo hermano*."

Cheviot smiled thinly at his guest as the door closed, leaving them in the room alone. Calmly, he swirled the brandy in his glass and lifted it to his lips. He did not drink, but instead inhaled deeply. The thin patrician nostrils dilated then pinched.

Rowdy straightened his spine and ground his fingernails into the palms of his hands. He had celebrated his win and warmed his chilled bones with a pony of brandy. It had left him relaxed and—he sensed—suddenly vulnerable. The room seemed very warm. His forehead and the skin between his shoulderblades felt damp.

Cheviot's eyes narrowed. As he lowered his glass, his smile widened. He gestured toward the pair of chairs beside the fire. "I think we need to settle things between us."

Rowdy hooked his thumb into his waistcoat and remained where he was. "I'm much obliged for your hospitality, but I'm not a bit sorry about the trick I played on your friend DeCamp."

The viscount made a dismissing gesture. "Clarence got exactly what he deserved. Indeed, he has deserved such a come-uppance for a long time. You are to be congratulated on your sense of style."

Rowdy's eyes widened. He grinned like a boy. "Suckered him good, didn't I?"

The viscount nodded. He splashed a generous amount of brandy into another snifter and approached Rowdy with it. "Suckered him good.' A very colorful expression."

The Texan backed away. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't need another thing. In fact I don't think you want your horses standing in the cold. I need to say good-bye and move on."

Cheviot set both glasses down. Eyes boring into his guest, he approached. "Surely not without what you came for."

The atmosphere in the room changed in an instant. Rowdy knew the meeting was for business. He shook his head. How to phrase the refusal delicately. "I didn't find what I came for."

The skin pulled taut around Cheviot's sculptured jaw. "The Audley herd is world famous."

"That bull looks pretty impressive," Rowdy conceded.

Cheviot waited. He had the air of a man facing a judge and jury.

Rowdy shrugged. A guest in the viscount's house as well as his country, he wanted to leave behind an atmosphere of good feeling. "I just don't think his get is what I need."

"Of course it is." Cheviot's voice cracked slightly. Then he steadied. "A young bull and a half-dozen fine cows would make all the difference in the world in your scrawny Texas stuff."

Rowdy stiffened. The conversation had turned into a name calling. Better get the hell out. He inclined his head. "Thanks just the same, but the answer's no."

Cheviot's skin darkened. Rowdy stared as the man flew into a rage. "You came out and presumed on my hospitality for the express purpose—"

"Now hold on."

"—of buying from the Audley herd. By God! You'll honor your commitment." Red splotches began to grow on his neck above his collar. "I'll not be tricked."

Rowdy backed toward the door and fumbled for the door-knob. He wasn't afraid of the smaller man. In fact, the man was so much smaller and slighter than Rowdy that he was sure he could have punched his lights out with one blow. "There wasn't any trick," he protested. "You invited us. We came. We didn't like what we saw."

"Damn you!"

He opened the door. "And we're leaving."

"You'll never buy from anyone," Cheviot threatened. Fists clenched, his voice swelled until he was fairly shouting. "If you don't buy my cattle, I'll be sure that you never have a chance to look at another herd. We Englishmen know you American savages. Not a gentleman in the lot of you—"

"*Adios*. It's been real interesting." Rowdy closed the door and bolted down the hall.

"I'm glad I'm around to watch your back." Gill was sprawled in his corner of the carriage, his feet propped on the seat across from him, his hat pulled down over his eyes.

"That's what I brought you along for, *primo hermano*."

Rowdy lay in much the same position beside him. Both swayed gently as the horses galloped over the post road toward London.

"Our host looked fit to be tied. And the Honorable Clarence DeCamp looked ready to shoot you. What will you do if he doesn't pay up?"

"Forget it," Rowdy murmured equably. "I don't need his money. I would have told him, but I want him to stew about it. Maybe next time he'll think twice before he tries to cheat a couple of Americans. As for the viscount's threats, when push comes to shove, money talks. We'll find a better herd, and they'll sell when they see the color of our money."

Gill said nothing. Privately, he was a little worried. DeCamp had struck him as a very unpleasant man. And Cheviot was powerful.

Rowdy shifted so he could rest his cheek against the squabs. "Let's just forget it. I need to get some beauty sleep. I reminded her of our date. Tomorrow night I'm going out with a duchess."

Chapter Seven

A Date with a Duchess

Rowdy knew he was grinning like an idiot. He should have been circumspect and cool since Duchess had made him wait for almost half an hour. Instead he shouldered aside the doorman and bolted across the pavement in front of the exclusive Gaddesdon House.

Before Peter could alight from the box of Mrs. Shires's coach, the Texan had opened the door and was reaching inside with his long arms. Duchess rose, waiting for the eager young man to pull down the step. Instead, he put his hands on her waist and swung her out and around.

"Mr. MacPherson!" she gasped.

Even Peter looked shocked.

Rowdy looked around him, grinning. "Did I do something wrong?"

The doorman at Gaddesdon House likewise gaped at the swirl of gold ruched satin. Never in his experience had a gentleman swung a lady out of a coach with so much enthusiasm as to reveal her ankles.

"The step," Peter growled softly. "You're supposed to pull the step down."

Rowdy barely heard him. His delighted stare was all for his supper partner, whom he held at arm's length.

The ensemble she wore tonight elicited his unrestrained admiration. Warm rose and gold satin glowed in the gaslights. No better colors could have been chosen to enhance Duchess's creamy skin and wealth of dark hair. A single strand of glowing pearls faithfully followed the demure V of her neckline. At the base of the V was a pink topaz brooch from which dangled three teardrop pearls. He stared so long that Duchess could feel herself blushing. Peter cleared his throat noisily.

Rowdy started. Then with a proud grin he offered her his arm. "Sorry, ma'am. But you sort of knocked me for a loop."

"Is that a compliment?" she inquired coolly.

The conversation outside her bedroom door was green in her memory. In her dreams she touched him at his invitation—not with just one hand—pulled his head down to hers, tasted again his warm mouth.

The weekend in the country had complicated their relationship. Mrs. Shires was ecstatic at the idea of her dining with him at one of the great restaurants of London. Peter had picked her up early, in order to have time to drive her by the lady's house so Avory could admire Duchess's new dress.

It was all too much and entirely too personal. She was close to losing her resolve. She must freeze him out. She must discourage him so that he would send her home early and never try to contact her again.

Since he had burst into her life, she had no time to move about the town and listen to the gossip of the streets and pubs. The thought of girls in trouble had begun to prey upon her mind. So long as she was being blackmailed by this man, they had not a chance to stage a rescue. He was the cause of their troubles.

He appeared not to notice her tone as the doorman opened the door for them. "Oh, it's a compliment. For sure. I guess you must be hungry. It's kind of late for supper."

"Not for Englishmen."

Once inside the restaurant, he found she was correct. They were the first guests. Though she noted that his ears were a little red, he said nothing. A very correct sommelier suggested a light aperitif. A haughty waiter with nose in the air spread

the napery across their laps and adjusted a sterling silver place fork a millimeter to the left. Another placed a three-tiered silver epergne on the pristine white linen between them.

Both Rowdy and Duchess stared at footed glasses of golden sherry and the choices on the epergne. Neither would admit to the other that he had never been served in such a manner. Nor did they admit that most of the food before them was a mystery.

Rowdy's Texas dining experience was primarily home cooking, a ranch table with large quantities of wholesome food with a Mexican flavor. Even the finest hotel restaurants in San Antonio and Houston served steaks and their accompanying cornbread, tomatoes, and onions. The drinks of choice were milk and beer. When the sommelier showed him the label on the bottle, he merely nodded. He had never heard of Spanish sherry from Jerez de la Frontera.

From a girl's school with execrable dining hall food to the streets of London, Duchess's diet for all her seventeen years was even more limited than his. She clutched at the edge of the table and tried to identify what she was expected to eat.

Sketching a stiff bow, another waiter stepped forward with tongs to serve her plate. The top of the epergne was layered with hearts of celery and several other vegetables which she could only guess at. She nodded at the celery, shook her head at something bright green, accepted some round stalks of something pale cream with golden tips.

On the next tier were small pies with fluted crusts. "Will madam have pork or veal?"

She looked at Rowdy nervously, but he, too, was studying the choices. He caught her look and smiled encouragingly. "Have both. I asked around. This place is supposed to have just about the best food in the West End."

The waiter unbent only slightly to give them a frosty nod. "The gentleman has been correctly informed."

With a nervous smile, Duchess chose veal.

The waiter did not ask her choice before lifting three succulent oysters in their half shells from the bed of ice on the lowest tier and placing them beside the vegetables. With a flourish, he spooned a yellow sauce over them. Then he set the plate in

front of her, giving it a quarter turn so it appeared to best advantage. "Madam."

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Sir."

Rowdy took a deep breath. "I'll have what you gave her, except hold those raw things on ice. I like my food cooked."

"No oysters, sir?" The waiter looked scandalized.

"Nope. But I'll have one of each of those meat pies."

When the waiter had withdrawn in hostile silence, Rowdy looked at Duchess. The plates were flanked on both sides with a half-dozen forks, knives, and spoons. Duchess relaxed slightly. The lonely years at The Chatsworth School had not been entirely wasted. At least she knew to pick up the fork farthest to the left.

Rowdy grinned. "Are you sure?"

His question broke the nervousness and embarrassment between them. "Of course."

He let out a low whistle. "I'm sure glad. I would have hated to have that fellow come back and find I'd picked up the wrong one."

She could not keep the corners of her mouth from twitching. Hastily, she lifted her napkin.

"Caught you," he teased. "Watch out. Your face is going to break. It's going to happen." He leaned forward, tilting his head to one side. "There it comes. It's happening. Now! You're smiling."

She pressed her lips together and lowered the napkin. "You have been a bane on my existence for the better part of a week. You have chased me through the streets of London and manhandled me—"

"You gave as good as you got," he reminded her.

She plunged on as if he had not spoken. "—forced me to entertain you—"

"I just wanted to know about the paintings."

"—all but kidnapped me to the country—"

"Now, I've already apologized for that."

"—and blackmailed me into coming here. Don't try to make this pleasant. Just tell me why."

He broke the veal pastry crust with his fork. Steam rose out of it. He inhaled with half-closed eyes. "Sure smells good."

"Tell me," she insisted.

He took a bite and chewed reflectively. "This is good," he decided, "but it could use some chili pepper seasoning." He looked at her as he cut into another bite. "You shouldn't be surprised about that. You can look in a mirror as well as the next girl. Because I wanted to see you again. You know I wanted to see you again the first time I met you. When I saw you all dressed up with your fancy friends, I wanted to see you more."

For a second she was speechless. Could a young man have gone to such extravagant lengths merely for the pleasure of her company? She did not know whether to believe him or not. Young men, especially handsome well-to-do young men, were unknown to her. Hot color stained her cheeks. "I think you've more than had your revenge."

"Revenge." He looked scandalized. "What did you ever do to me that I'd want revenge for?"

"Exactly. But some men are very spoiled." Her own father had been such a one.

"I don't want revenge," he stated baldly.

She looked at him narrowly. If not revenge, then the other motive was lower. Perhaps some other girl would be flattered enough to give him what he wanted, what all men wanted. But not she. She hoped her tone was sufficiently icy. "I'm not prepared to give you anything. I don't even want to see you."

He raised one dark red eyebrow. "You lie, lady. You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to see me again. That blackmail thing's a lot of smoke. And you know it. You've got a pretty good idea that I wouldn't do anything to you. You didn't kiss like you didn't want to see me again."

She glared as an angry blush rose in her cheeks. She hated to admit even to herself that he was right. Still she was sure that he wanted one thing and one thing only. Knowing that, what did that say about her motives?

Hastily, he changed the subject. "Come on. Pick up that fork

and eat one of those raw things out of the shell. I want to see that."

She was furious. He was teasing. He was a terrible tease as his cousin had said. Stabbing the fork into the plump center of the oyster, she twirled it in the sauce before lifting it to her lips. With a defiant smile on her face, she popped it into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed it.

He grinned in admiration. "I'll be darned. You really did it."

"They are quite fresh. And the sauce is excellent." She looked around haughtily. "This is a very expensive restaurant. Are you sure you can afford it?"

"I'm sure." He took a swallow of sherry. One of his eyebrows rose again. "Good stuff. Of course, it's no more expensive than a new dress."

She laid down her fork. "A lady doesn't accept clothing from a gentleman. I wish you wouldn't discuss such things anymore."

"All right." He finished the first pastry and cut into the second one. "Let's discuss you, Miss Smythe. Or shall I call you Duchess? What was a beautiful girl doing out in the alley behind a gambling hell after midnight? Does that nice old lady and her 'lordship' son know what you're up to?"

"Surely, that's my business."

"It's every citizen's business to turn a thief over to the police," he observed. "What do you all call them here? Scotland Yard?"

She laid down her fork. The waiters appeared to take away the plates and bring on the next course. "You got your money back," she reminded him coldly.

"My pride sure took a beating." He finished off the last of his sherry before the sommelier came with a white wine. "Getting my pocket picked by a six-year-old kid was a real comeuppance for me. And she darn near got away."

"I'm sure your pride has recovered," Duchess observed dryly. "Certainly your gall has not been damaged."

The corners of his mouth drooped. "I'm wounded to the quick."

She leaned across the table, eyes flashing. "Then let me go."

He merely looked at her, held her eyes with his amazing ones until she faltered and heat rose in her cheeks.

"Madam."

She had to sit back quickly when the waiter set soup plates on their chargers and served them a delicate clear soup.

"This one I can figure out for myself." Rowdy picked up the round-bowled soup spoon with a grin.

They ate that course in silence while she stoked her anger. The food was so good and the wines so delightful, she could feel herself relaxing. She might actually make a slip and smile before she remembered.

During the Dover sole in clear lemon sauce, she asked him about his life in Texas and his reasons for coming to London.

He leaned back in his chair. "It's my first big responsibility," he told her candidly. "I've got to find the best Herefords in England to improve the cattle on El Rincon. My papa sent me because someday the ranch is going to be all mine. My oldest brother married a girl who's got a ranch of her own. He's interested in running hers. My second brother practices law in San Antonio with Papa. But I love El Rincon. I grew up there and I want to stay there for the rest of my life.

"I'm looking for . . ." He launched into a dissertation about various characteristics of cattle that meant nothing to Duchess.

A tiny voice in her mind whispered that she was staring at him like a lovesick calf, bewitched by his flashing turquoise eyes, carried along on the tide of his youthful enthusiasm. Irritated, she silenced the voice. What harm could befall her if she just sat across the table and exchanged words with a man so young. After all, he was not exactly handsome. She could not decide if she liked his coloring. What would their children be like?

She clutched at the edge of the table as the thought flashed across her mind. Where had it come from? She thrust it away and looked at him as critically as if she were buying him. Besides the eyes, he had a bristling shock of wavy red hair and white, white skin. It stretched smooth and unlined over a broad forehead, high cheekbones, and a square chin. Really, he was too much of everything.

His eyebrows were dark red and his eyelashes so pale they

were almost invisible. But the eyes drew her into him. They flashed with animation. Before she could catch herself, she knew a moment of real regret that they had met under such circumstances. She could have liked him very much. She suppressed a thrill along her spine. She might even have loved him. If she had believed in love.

The first English guests arrived during the presentation of a single marrow *pâté* on a tiny round of toast.

As they were seated with the same ostentation, Rowdy grinned. "Somebody else is getting hungry."

The main course was boiled beef with various sauces accompanied by peas and beets. The red wine had so much body that it made Duchess blink. She set it down immediately. Her stays were growing uncomfortably tight.

Rowdy watched her pull herself up straighter. "I've never seen so much food," he observed. "We've left enough on our plates to feed a family of six back in San Antone."

Before she thought she replied, "Or a family of a dozen here in London."

He looked at her steadily, a question in his eyes. What he might have asked was forestalled when another flock of waiters whisked away their plates, brought forth a pastry tray and a cheese board, and poured dessert wine into the last glasses on the table.

"What may I serve you, madam?"

She really didn't want anything more, but she wanted to prolong the meal until a decent hour when she could make her excuses and go home. Alone. Unless—Apprehension chilled her. Perhaps he had plans to take her elsewhere. "A wafer of Stilton and perhaps a *petit four*."

"An excellent choice. And for you, sir."

"Nothing." He waited until the man had bowed and left. "You don't need to get nervous," he said softly. "I'm not going to jump on you the minute we get out of here."

She looked down at her plate, wanting to conceal the feeling of relief. Now if only he was a man of his word . . .

* * *

He hired a cab and asked the driver to put the top down. Despite the coolness of the night, they rode through St. James's Park. The horse clip-clopped through a light ground fog that allowed Rowdy and Duchess to look up and see the stars.

Relaxed from the wine and the excellent food, she allowed her head to fall back, to find his arm behind her. A few minutes later his fingertips pressed against her shoulder, pushing her gently toward his side. She stiffened, but he brought his mouth down close to her ear. "Relax. You're safe. I promise."

She knew she should be on the alert, but the gentle creaking and swaying of the carriage lulled her. It might have been only a minute later. She could not be sure. Somehow, his lips were caressing her temple and her cheek, and his voice was saying, "Wake up, sleepyhead."

She sat up embarrassed. "I wasn't asleep."

He chuckled. "Sure you were. You were even snoring."

She swung round. "I was not. I don't snore."

"Who told you that?"

The question stopped her as it was meant to. She looked around her hastily. They were still driving around St. James's Park. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "That is, I didn't mean to be rude. I—"

He caught her hands and drew her back against him. "Don't apologize. I think I went to sleep too."

They rode once around the park again. This time the situation was very different, uncomfortably different. She was aware of him. The warmth of his big hands. The thud of his heart against his ribs that moved with his steady breathing. The scent of him. She swallowed. He must be just as aware of her.

His lips touched the lobe of ear, her cheek.

Sensations that were becoming disturbingly familiar scorched her skin. She should have pulled away instantly. She arched her back, bringing her breasts tight against him. She should have pushed herself out of his arms and delivered a stinging reprimand. And she would have done so—her palms flattened against his chest—in just a minute.

His mouth closed over hers. She told herself her mouth opened to his because she was getting ready to speak. Instead, she kissed him, her passion kindling, her breath catching in her throat. He tasted—he tasted like Rowdy. He tasted just as she remembered.

His arm around her shoulders tightened and pulled her to him. His other arm—She shivered as his hand slid over her satin skirt and closed over her thigh. She could feel his heat through all her layers of clothing as he pulled her lower body against his too.

She recognized the way he had kissed her before. It must have been the American way. It was likely to drive her wild. She lost all sense of time and place. Only his mouth, his warmth, the sensations his hands created. She felt an ache begin in the depths of her body and a hot swollen feeling between her legs.

Suddenly, he tore his mouth away. "God damn!"

She blinked and whimpered.

He took his arms from around her and sat up, bowing his head and sucking in deep breaths. "Pardon my language, Duchess. But we've got to stop now, or I'm not going to be able to."

"Oh."

He turned his head. "Unless you don't want me to stop."

"Oh. Oh, no. You must s-stop." She realized she did not want him to stop. Her fingers itched to pull him back. Her breasts ached to press against him again.

He sighed. "Where's your home?"

The question chased away the last vestiges of her dream of pleasure. She looked around her. "Not too far from here. The driver can let me down anywhere."

Rowdy groaned. "That again. I'll tell you Duchess Smythe or whatever your name is, you are one stubborn woman."

"It's the way I've had to be," she told him quietly.

He sighed. "This is about the hardest thing I've ever had to do. But I'll say good night."

"And goodbye." Her voice was just a little tremulous.

He patted her knee. "It's a crying shame, but if that's what you want . . ."

Her stomach twisted in a painful knot. A very real part of her was being torn away. She could barely say the words. "It is."

"Then I'll say goodbye." He leaned up to the driver. "The Ritz Hotel."

They sat side by side, not touching, as the old horse seemed to race through the night.

Gill pulled the covers up to his chin. Was England perpetually cold and damp? He shivered. Only a faint pink light remained behind the grate of the coal stove. Before long that, too, would die. He closed his eyes, thinking of the hacienda at El Rincon, the red poinsettias blooming all year round, the Texas sun bright and hot on a man's skin.

Once again he admitted to himself that he was homesick. He had been so excited at the prospect of this trip. He would see London, the greatest city in the world, the seat of the British Empire, the empire on which the sun never set. He would see the pageant of history, taste the foods, enjoy luxuries undreamed of in and around San Antonio.

And all he wanted to do was go home. Glumly, he stuck his feet down against the cold warming pan in his bed. Very seldom had anyone at El Rincon needed even a warm brick.

A faint click interrupted his self-pitying reverie. He sat up in bed. "Rowdy? Is that you? You're sure back early, *primo hermano*."

A moment's hesitation and then a key turned in the lock and a figure slipped into the room. The door shut with a soft thud, but not before Gill bolted up in alarm. His visitor was not Rowdy.

"Gill."

When he recognized the voice, Guillermo rolled his eyes. "Damn! Where'd you come from, Cheviot?"

The viscount's face was stiff as marble as he moved toward the bed. "This is London. I live here. I didn't find your cousin in his room."

Hurriedly, Gill climbed out on the other side of the bed and

began to drag on his robe. "No. He's out." He stared pointedly at the viscount's hand. "Where'd you get the key?"

Not a flicker of embarrassment touched the regal countenance. "Audley demands. Audley receives."

"Well, you've picked the wrong customer to receive from." Gill kept the bed between them. Although he thought he knew exactly what the viscount had come for, he could not be certain. The memory of the veritable arsenal at Audley flitted through his mind. He sidled toward the bureau, where he had stored his own .45. "Rowdy made the decision about the cattle. It's his ranch and his money. I don't have anything to do with that."

"I think you may be able to influence him," Cheviot said significantly. He struck a match. Reaching up, he held its flame to the gas. When he spoke again, his voice was tinged with irony. "'Let there be light.'"

Gill could see him plainly now. The viscount's carefully brushed hair glinted pale silver. He looked altogether self-assured despite the fact that he was an intruder. The Texan promised himself he was going to raise hell with the Ritz Hotel. How dare they give another man a key to the room?

The viscount crossed to the foot of the bed and leaned forward. He stared at the slighter man for a long moment. Then he blinked. "You have Rowdy's best interests at heart. You must make him see that not to buy from Audley would be a disastrous mistake."

The man was looking at him so strangely. Gill tugged the ends of the sash tighter. "I don't have anything to say about it."

"The situation could become very uncomfortable for him here in England. In fact it will become so." Cheviot came round the end of the bed. His blue-veined white hand wound itself around the bedpost. "Since he is a liar and—"

"Hold on." Gill could feel himself heating up. "Rowdy's no liar."

Cheviot allowed himself a small smile. "Ah, but he is. A liar. A cheat. A swindler. Probably a card sharp."

Gill pointed toward the door. "You'd better leave."

"Where is he?"

Gill brushed past the viscount and crossed the room in long strides. Rowdy was as close as a brother to him. He flung open the door to the hall. "Get out."

Cheviot smiled thinly. "Of course. You Americans are all the same. I shall make it a point to let the rest of London society know that you are not to be trusted." He strolled toward the door, his icy demeanor a combination of insolence and contempt. "No one will deal with a liar and cheat."

Gill called him a vicious name in Spanish.

"You are probably worse than he, being the product of a mongrel race—"

Gill's clenched fist connected with the point of the fine-boned jaw. The force of it sent the viscount flying out into the hall. The man crashed into a sidetable, sending a Chinese vase and brass candlesticks clattering. He staggered back against the wall and caught himself.

With Gill watching, Cheviot hung there for a minute, then he straightened. Something very like a smile flickered at the corners of his mouth. He placed his hand to the injury. A red mark began to swell out instantly.

"I'm—er—sorry . . ." Gill took a step across the threshold.

"Help! Help!"

Gill gaped at him. Suddenly, the hall seemed to be full of people. A maid stood at the end of the corridor, a load of towels in her arms. A gentleman and a lady in evening dress came round the corner. And Clarence DeCamp came bounding up the stairs to throw his arm around the viscount's shoulder. "Cheviot! My God, man, did the barbarian assault you?"

Still smiling, Cheviot pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth. A red stain appeared on the pristine linen. The lady gasped. "Yes," the viscount said, with an air of satisfaction. "I've been assaulted."

Chapter Eight

Out of the Fog

"I don't know why I have to stay with Mrs. Nance." Pan stamped her foot. "First, you're gone to the country for two days, and I don't see you at all. Now you're going out to rescue and you don't take me with you. You've always taken me with you. You say I'm ever so clever."

"You are clever, Pansy. I shall miss you very much. But you're in school now. You can't stay out all night and go to school during the day."

Pan's face turned pink. She flounced across the room and kicked at the small rosewood chair in the kneehole of her desk. "I knew I hated school. I said I hated to go. Now I'm certain. I won't go anymore. I'm going to be a rescuer. That's much more important."

She snatched up the offending books and was about to slam them to the floor when Duchess caught her by shoulders. "No," she said firmly. "No. School doesn't really have anything to do with this. I'm not going in a coach tonight. I'm going with Bert and Peter. We're have to walk quite a distance."

"I can walk." Tears started in the blue eyes. "You know I can."

Duchess took her handkerchief and dabbed gently at the sparkling trails. "I know you can, but this could be very

dangerous. You're brave as a lion, but you're also seven years old."

Pan turned her head aside to look at herself in the mirror. "I don't exactly remember how old I am." She thrust out her bottom lip and set it to quivering. "I'm an orphan. I might be eight. Or even nine."

Duchess hugged her hard. "I don't think so. I think you are seven and you need your rest so you'll grow up to be eight."

Pan sighed. Her face took on a most forlorn expression. "Since we moved into this house, nobody lets me do anything. I'm just a slave you send to school."

Duchess laughed as she pointed to Pan's pink cheeks in the mirror. "A well-fed slave. Mrs. Nance will fix you some junket before you go to bed. And I'll read you two stories before I leave. In case you can stay awake for both of them."

"Of course I can," Pan insisted.

As Rowdy and Gill crossed the hotel lobby, a gentleman blocked their way. He touched his bowler hat politely. "If I may have a moment of your time . . ."

Rowdy shrugged and grinned offhandedly. "We're kind of in a hurry."

The man nodded solemnly. "I'm from Scotland Yard. Detective Inspector Clive Revill."

Rowdy's grin slipped. He exchanged a quick look with Gill, who gave his head a faint shake. "Pleased to meet you, Sheriff."

"It's inspector. We might want to step over here." He gestured toward an alcove swagged in maroon velvet.

Puzzled, they accompanied him. When they were shielded by its relative privacy, he pulled a paper from his breast pocket and studied it carefully. A frown drew his brows together. He sighed heavily. "I have here a warrant for the arrest of one Goo-ill-lermo Sandoval."

"What the hell?" Both men stared at him in pure amazement.

"Are you this Mr. Sandoval?" Revill pronounced the surname with the accent on the second syllable. He directed his question to Gill.

"That's right. But—"

"A complaint has been lodged against you by Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot. According to his deposition, you assaulted him, doing bodily harm to his person while he was a guest in your room in this very hotel."

"Just a damn minute . . ." Rowdy began.

"He wasn't my guest." Striving for calm, Gill interrupted his cousin. "I don't think he wants anyone to know, but he got into—"

"That'll all come out when you give your statement downtown. If you'll be so good as to come with me now." Revill's words were polite, his tone was mild, but his implacability was apparent.

Every nerve in Gill's body screamed. He was being arrested in a foreign country for striking a member of that country's ruling class. He was going to jail. When would he ever get out? He was only twenty years old.

Rowdy let rip a heartfelt curse as the color drained from his cousin's face. He laid a big hand on the inspector's shoulder. "Now just hold on. My cousin told me all about what happened, and I'll have you know that he was defending himself."

Revill looked meaningfully at Rowdy's hand until it fell away and clenched into a fist. "According to the complaint, Lord Cheviot was the victim of an unprovoked attack to which there were witnesses." He looked them both up and down. "You're Americans, right?"

"Texans."

"Well, gentlemen, a word of warning. When you're in a foreign country, you should behave like good guests." He tapped the warrant. "I know of Sir Francis only slightly. But his father, the Earl of Audley, is a very important man. Member of Parliament. Diplomatic corps. Order of—"

Rowdy cut the recital short. He was getting red in the face, a sure sign that his temper was fraying. "I don't care if he's the Queen's brother, you're not going to take Gill to jail."

"Easy, Rowdy." Suddenly, Gill was afraid that Rowdy would say something that would cause him to be arrested too. With them both on the inside, they would have no chance.

"Hell, Gill. Tell the man what happened." He rounded on the inspector. "Listen. Back home, we'd be swearing out a warrant for his arrest. This was just a misunderstanding."

"I'm sure." Revill tried to be consoling, even as he firmly separated the two cousins. To Rowdy, he said, "Why don't you go round and talk to young Cheviot? You seem like nice young men. I'm sure if you just apologize to—"

"The hell with that!" Rowdy jerked off his Stetson and raked his fingers through his hair. "The hell with that. If anybody's owed an apology, it's Gill."

"Rowdy," Gill counseled as Revill motioned him away.

Rowdy followed them across the lobby. At the door he delivered his last word. "You just take your time about getting him down there. You hear? Don't bother throwing him in a cell 'cause Cheviot'll be over *muy pronto* to withdraw those charges."

The door closed behind the two. Rowdy spun and slung his hat onto the floor. Then he slammed his fist into the wall for good measure. "You'll sure withdraw those charges, Mr. Viscount, or I'll smear that pretty face of yours from here to sundown."

The desk clerk, the bell captain, and the doorman stared at him in wonder.

"Ten minutes."

Rowdy could feel his shoulders twitch as the heavy door thudded shut behind him. Seconds turned to minutes before another door across the room opened and Gill was escorted in. Two chairs were positioned facing each other with six feet between them. The uniformed warden motioned them both to their seats. Then he crossed his arms and stationed himself behind the prisoner.

They stared at each for several seconds before Gill smiled. "*Qué tal, primo hermano?*"

The guard started. His brow wrinkled.

"*Bien Y usted?*"

"*Bueno. Bueno.*"

"Here now, you two. Speak English. None of that foreign stuff. No secrets."

Rowdy shot the guard an annoyed look.

Gill smiled apologetically. "We don't have any secrets. You don't have to worry. Does he, Rowdy?"

Rowdy shook his head. "Are you all right, Gill. Do you have everything? Hot meals, baths, shaves. I've forked over lots of *dinero*."

Gill grinned. "I'm getting it all. Everything's so good, I'm getting to like it here."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

The two stared at each other, agony in their faces.

"I couldn't get into Cheviot's house," Rowdy said at last. "But I've got a hunch I'll find him tonight at that Devil's saloon. I expect that four-flusher DeCamp'll be riding point for him. I'll have to cut the maverick out of the herd before I can get him in here."

"Hold on," the guard interrupted. "I told you not to talk any of that foreign stuff."

"We're speaking English," Gill objected mildly.

"Not the Queen's," came the stiff reply.

Rowdy cursed viciously.

"None of that. Or I'll take him back." The guard consulted his pocket watch. "You've got three and a half minutes."

"You've got to keep your temper, Cousin," Gill counseled.

Rowdy bowed his head. "I know." He swallowed. "I sorta went off half-cocked at Cheviot's place today."

Gill waited.

"I pushed past the butler and started hunting. They called the police on me."

Gill rolled his eyes. "Damn, Rowdy. I'm never going to get out of here."

Rowdy rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead. "This is all my fault. I should be the one sitting there. You kept begging me not to get mixed up with that mess, but I just wouldn't listen. Hell, you wanted to go to art galleries and museums."

Gill sighed. "Send them a letter, Rowdy. Set up an appointment through a lawyer."

"I don't even know how to get a lawyer." Rowdy dragged his hand through his hair. "They don't call them lawyers here. They're barristers or—there's another name for them—"

"Solicitor," the guard supplied.

Gill flashed him a grin. "*Gracias, amigo.*"

"Solicitor." Rowdy nodded glumly. "And one doesn't do what the other does."

"Time's up," the guard announced.

Rowdy rose, speaking very quickly. "Gill, I swear I'll find Cheviot tonight and get you out of here. And when I do, we'll hightail it straight for home. Cattle be damned."

"*Adios,*" Gill called from the door as the guard hustled him out.

The truth of the matter was that the beautiful Florina had not received the rose from the enchanted blue bird before Pan was fast asleep. A copy of a new book for children, *The Jungle Book* by Mr. Rudyard Kipling, lay waiting to be opened.

Duchess smiled as she tried to adjust the covers. Immediately, Pan pulled them tightly around her and burrowed her head under the pillow. When Duchess pushed the pillow back away from her face, Pan whimpered faintly like a kitten mewling. Even in a deep sleep, she sought concealment. Was the bravery that she exhibited all day long a cover-up for the terrified baby child that crawled out when she slept? Duchess suspected her charge kept unnamed terrors buried deep inside her. Only when Pan was asleep did they rise to haunt her dreams.

Although the time was only five o'clock, the streets were dark when Rowdy left the Old Bailey. A mist was falling, threatening to turn to rain at any minute. Buttoning his coat high at the neck, he thrust his hands into his pockets and stomped down the street. His long legs carried him quickly

over the pavement. With his wide-brimmed Stetson pulled down to protect himself, he strode along head down.

Suddenly, a man's legs blocked his way. Rowdy stepped to the side, but the man moved with him. He raised his head just as a terrific blow across the back of his neck catapulted him forward.

Paralyzed, Rowdy fell into the arms of the man who had blocked his way. "Grab his legs."

He could not resist as his feet were whisked up in the air. His head fell back, his crushed hat rolled away into the darkness. A couple of swings and his body went sailing through the air to land hard, facedown in the back of a wagon.

"Whip 'em up!" His assailants followed him, leaping in after him, their feet crashing down on his limp body.

He groaned. Desperate to defend himself, he managed to drag his right hand from under him.

"Watch 'im! 'E's a big 'un."

Hard hands caught both his wrists and wrapped a rope around them. A couple of twists and he was bound tightly.

"What's 'e got?"

They rolled him onto his back, his hands trapped beneath him. He opened his eyes, but his vision was so blurred, he could see nothing but three dark silhouettes moving above him. They dragged his coat open.

"'Ere y' go." One pulled his gold stickpin from his cravat.

"Coo. Easy pickin's." A cold hand dived beneath his suit to draw out his wallet.

"Damme! Beat me to it."

Rowdy felt his watch jerked out of its pocket. Fine brocade split when the chain ripped a hole in his vest.

"What about them boots, Dogger?"

"If y' want 'em, pull 'em off," a voice growled.

As the hands gripped his ankle, Rowdy sucked in a deep breath and sent a message down his body. His long leg flexed, pulling the man toward him, then shot forward. His bootheel slammed into the robber's chest knocking him backward. Rowdy heard a satisfying cry of alarm accompanied by a thud as the body fell from the wagon.

"Bleedin' sod!" the downed man shouted. "Wait up. Lemme at that blighter."

"So, yer comin' to," the one called Dogger grated. "I usually 'its 'em down fer th' count. Your 'ead must be 'ard as a rock. But this'll keep y' quiet." With a low growl he drove a short left into Rowdy's temple.

Rowdy's head cracked against the bed of the wagon. Brilliant colors flashed across his vision. He gasped for breath, only to have it driven out of his lungs by his assailant as Dogger's full body weight dropped onto Rowdy's chest. Knees like stones smashed into already damaged ribs. "Lis'en to me, if y' know w'at's good fer y'. This 'ere is a warning."

"W-warning."

"Y' 'eard me. Lis'en. Yer friend's rottin' till y' crawl. Got it?" The kneeling man's foul breath made Rowdy gag and turn his head aside. A sharp slap to the side of Rowdy's head brought him back almost nose to nose. "Yer friend's rottin' till y' crawl."

Rowdy groaned.

"Got it?"

Rowdy could barely nod.

"Say it."

"M-my friend's rotting till I crawl." His lungs labored vainly to expand his ribs compressed by Dogger's considerable weight.

"Good. Now lookee 'ere."

"Wh-what?" Rowdy caught the flash of a knifeblade slashing back and forth before his eyes.

"In case y' ain't learnt how to crawl, we're gonna learn y'."

Panic-stricken, Rowdy bucked weakly but could not dislodge the crushing weight. The heel of a hard hand rammed under the point of his chin. A point of cold steel seared into his flesh just below his throat. He sucked in his breath at the pain. Cloth ripped as his assailant reared back and dragged the knife point down Rowdy's chest.

The Texan howled with anger and fear as it sliced through his skin. "Damn you!"

"Now that ain't nice!" Dogger's point was sharp as a scalpel, slicing a trail of fire past the ribs across his victim's concave belly. It stopped when it grated against his belt buckle.

Shaking with fear and the strain of sucking in his belly, sure that the weapon would be buried to the hilt in the next instant, Rowdy held his breath as the assailant seemed to hesitate.

Then Dogger laughed aloud. "Consider yerself lucky."

With a last excruciating twist, the knife was gone. The weight sprang off him.

Rowdy sucked in his first clear lungful of air in what seemed an eternity and felt the hot blood flow down either side of his waist. He was shaking, his senses turning on one frightening thought. How badly was he hurt?

"That's fer 'im." Dogger kicked him in the thigh. "Now, give me a 'and 'ere, lad. Dump 'im over. Hop on, y' bloody fool," he called to the thug still loping along behind. "Enough's enough. T' th' real business."

They thrust their hands under Rowdy's shoulders and pulled him to his feet. This part of the city was pitch black. No streetlights. His assailants let go of his bound arms. One of them planted a boot in his backside and vaulted him out into the street. He twisted in the air and managed to land on his side rather than his face. His temple struck the paving stone.

The victim lay limp, the mist turning to rain on his cheek. His blood flowed into the slime of the cobblestones.

Filthy water slapped rhythmically against the slimy pilings. Vessels bent on riding out with the tide blew their baleful horns periodically. The icy air stank of rotting fish and decaying sewage. Through impenetrable rolling fog that blanketed the Thames came all the sounds and smells of it. Except for them, no passerby on the embankment could have told where he was, a fact which accounted for the numbers of people each year who lost their way and walked into the river and drowned.

From the midnight black in an alley, Bert Nance betrayed his presence with steady snuffles, coughs, and sneezes.

"Why on earth did you come tonight?" Duchess asked him again. "You're too sick to be here."

"I'm all right," the ex-prizefighter defended himself. "It's just a touch of . . ." What it might have been a touch of was

never revealed, for he broke off to cough—deep painful convulsions that tore out of his throat.

"Stubble it," Peter hissed. "Somebody's comin'."

Although the fog muffled and distorted everything, they could all hear hoofbeats.

Bert clapped his hands over his mouth and struggled to get himself under control. Drawing in careful, shallow breaths, he felt the tickling ease.

"'Ow many are we talkin' about 'ere?" Peter asked.

"Half a dozen," Duchess whispered. "Johnny Ronce was pretty sure of the number. Bound for Tangiers."

"Poor birds," Peter muttered. They all knew the fate of young girls bound for the slave markets in Morocco. Misery, degradation, disease, then stuffed into a sack and thrown into the river to drown when they began to lose the first bloom of their youth. Despite the danger, he and Bert followed Duchess, and Mrs. Shires paid them double.

"Quiet. Here they come." Duchess bowed her back over a stout cudgel. Dressed as an ancient hag, she limped out into the street to meet the wagon.

The driver pulled the horses to a halt. "Watch out, grammer!"

As though she had not heard, the old woman staggered into his path, a black silhouette in the sea of gray fog that rolled about her shirts. Duchess raised her head, weaving on her feet as if she were drunk. Her drooping clothing and long hanks of hair swayed with her. "W'at y' sayin'?"

"Yer gonna git run down, old gel. Git on 'ome."

"W'at?"

"Git outta the way." He slapped his reins against the horses' backs. The team moved forward slowly. The old woman swayed and staggered past the horse, whining in a cracked voice about drink and God. The driver lifted his whip prepared to fend her off.

Suddenly, at the rear of his wagon, a fierce spate of coughing broke out.

Standing in the box, the driver leaned out to try to see through the muffling darkness. "Who's there?"

"Bert, y' bloody fool," a voice snarled. "Take care of him."

Still coughing, Bert plunged along the wagon's side. But Duchess was quicker. She darted forward and caught hold of the long muffler swinging from the driver's neck.

"Hey!"

With a swift tug she toppled him out of the box. As he fell, she leaped aside. He hit the pavement with a sodden thud.

At the back of the wagon, Peter found the hasp on the double doors. A simple peg was rammed through the eye. He plucked it out and yanked them open.

A club slammed down on the top of his head. He crumpled with a groan.

"Petey!" Bert came round the end of the wagon as four men sprang to the ground. Brandishing clubs, their shadowy forms spread out to catch him in a circle.

Bert took their measure at a glance. "One or a dozen, buckos, if it's a fight yer spoilin' fer, y' got it."

The one who had struck down Peter charged. A short man with an enormous reach, he came screaming with his club swinging at Bert's head. The fighter ducked under it and brought his right fist up into the man's belly. At the same time his shoulder rammed upward under the upraised arm. The tough's breath went out in a loud whoosh and he toppled forward.

Bert threw him aside and came up with fists milling. "C'mon, gents. There's more where that came from." Over his shoulder, he shouted, "Run, Duchess!"

The other three hesitated. The swiftness with which Bert had eliminated their leader made them wary.

"Get away, Duchess!" Bert called again. He could hear her footsteps behind him, feel her presence at his shoulder.

"I'll stand with you."

One of the toughs pointed at her with his club. "That's th' one th' boss wants. I'll take 'er. You two 'andle 'im."

"Oh, sure. Take th' bird while we 'andle th' bloke," one carped. "'Ell with you, Dogger."

"For Gawd's sake, Duchess, run," Bert begged. "I can't take 'em all on and look out fer you too."

She pressed her hand to his shoulder. "God bless you, Bert."

He nodded. He felt her clothing brush against him as she turned and sprinted off into the fog. Then he gave a hoarse bark of laughter. "C'mon, Petey! That's my man. I knew they couldn't keep y' down. Up on yer feet now and clobber 'em!"

The men threw startled looks behind them. One went so far as to whirl around.

Without compunction or sense of fair play, Bert stepped in and delivered a rabbit punch to the back of the neck. The tough beside him swung his club with a shout. It struck Bert a numbing blow to his right shoulder, staggering him against the wagon's open door.

Dogger took one look before dashing away into the darkness after Duchess.

She could hear him following her, heavy boots thudding. She could lose him but for her heels clacking on the pavement. Dropping down, she pulled her shoes off. The fog closed over her head.

Her assailant stopped running too. As she wrestled with the leather shoelaces, she could imagine him listening, turning his head from side to side in the darkness.

Through the fog billowing around and between them came his voice. "Come t' Dogger, birdy. I can see y'. Y' ain't got a chance. Stop right where y' are and I won't beat y'."

He was bluffing. And lying too. Her shoes were off. She remained in a crouch. The fog waved and billowed around her, concealing her in its muffling blanket. He could not see her, but she could not see where she was going. Cautiously, she stuck her head up. She was in luck. He stood scratching his head, staring down the street that ran off at an acute angle.

An alley gaped, blacker black than the buildings on either side. She ducked into it and fell sprawling. An ashcan rolled away with a loud clatter, metal against stone. Her luck had run out.

Dogger thudded to the entrance. "Now that's done fer y'," he called. "Made a mistake. No way out."

Her heart sank when she heard his words. She could see him silhouetted in the fog, beefy shoulders hunched, his club dangling from his fist. As she froze, he pointed it directly at

her. He could see her. He knew the territory better than she did. He must have known she had run into a blind alley. Otherwise, he would have been following her. As she watched, he made a motion with his free hand.

"C'mon back 'ere. Don't waste m' time. A man's gonna pay good money fer y', and 'e don't care what y' look like."

Monro Taine.

She shuddered. Stooping, she swept her hands back and forth across the alley surface. If she could find a rock, a lump of coal, a stout log, anything that would serve as a weapon. Failing that, she still would not surrender without a fight.

"Don't try t' crawl away in th' fog," he warned. "C'mon, blast y'."

On the third sweep, her fingers encountered the edge of a sharp stone. Long ago someone had probably laid it flat to form a pavement, but now it tilted sideways, thrusting up out of the muck. Though it was slippery with slime, she managed to worry it loose. At least she had a weapon, a formidable one. It must have weighed ten pounds with sharp edges. She hefted it and gripped it firmly.

"C'mon," Dogger called angrily, twirling his club. "Don't make me come in t' get y'. Y' won't like w'at 'appens."

"I'm coming," she murmured. With both hands she held her weapon in front of her, clutching it against her skirt. Though the darkness was pervasive, she did not want him to see the stone until she raised it above her head.

"C'mon," he called again.

Taking a deep breath, she walked toward him. "I'm coming." She made her voice sound as if she were weeping. "Don't hurt me. Please."

He chuckled and hefted his club.

She approached within three feet of him. Her fingers tightened around the stone.

He motioned with his free hand. "I ain't gonna 'urt y'."

Two feet. Bad luck that he was tall. She swung the rock up. "W'at th' 'ell?"

She rammed it with all her might straight at his face.

But he was fast. Faster than she was. His club slammed into

her unprotected side, staggering her. Pain flamed along her ribs. Instead of catching him full in the face, the rock grazed his chin and crashed into his shoulder.

He howled and drew back to swing again. She whirled like a dervish, her rock thrust out in front of her still at the level with his face. As the weapon slammed into his nose, she opened her fingers. He howled like a dog. Dropping his club, he clapped both hands to his face. The rock crashed down, barely missing his toes.

Duchess sucked in her breath and dodged away from his staggering figure. Heedless of the direction, she tore away into the fog, running for her very life.

Rain pattering down on his face wakened Rowdy MacPherson. He managed to sit up and look around him. He might have been in a narrow street or a wide alley. He could not tell which. All he knew was that his position was precarious if a carter's team came galloping through it.

He peered around him in the darkness. He looked upward, and the rain falling into his eyes blinded him, even as it washed some of the pain away. Buildings of some kind must have been on either side of him. His first task was to move his body to one.

He levered himself up on his knees. Immediately, hot blood flowed down inside his pants. *God!* Was he bleeding to death? The thought made him weak. He could not push himself up to stand.

He swung his head from side to side. The darkness looked blackest on his right. That had to be the closest building. If he could get to it, he could prop himself against its side and push himself to his feet.

When he realized he was dragging himself along on his knees, he cursed softly. He shook his head. What a mess he had made of everything! Gill was in jail. He was hurt. How badly, he could not guess. Setting his teeth, he put one foot

under him, but his head was too light. As he struggled to rise, he almost fell on his face.

You've been kicked in the head one too many times, old son. Or you've lost too much blood. He had to find help and soon.

Hunching slowly along, his hands already numb from the ropes around his wrists, he reached the side of a structure which sheltered him from the rain. There he crouched to assess the situation.

How much was he bleeding? He could not see the burning wound in his chest, but he could feel his blood still running sluggishly into his pants.

Had he cracked his shoulder in the fall from the wagon? His whole body seemed like a mass of bruises, but his shoulder hurt worst where it had taken the weight of his falling body.

Thank God for his legs. If he could only get onto his feet.

He pushed experimentally against the wall. The pain increased in his shoulder. He gritted his teeth. With a little luck it was only dislocated. A good sawbones could pop it back in place and he'd be right as rain. Hell, Gill could pop it back in place. If he could get Gill out of jail. The thought of his cousin's plight strengthened his determination.

He blinked and squinted in the gloom. *Where in the hell was everybody?*

In the biggest city in the world, he couldn't see a living soul. Moaning behind his teeth, he pushed himself up along the wall, his upper body protesting every inch of the way.

On his feet he rested again and opened his mouth to call for help.

Then he looked around warily. Did he dare call out? After all, he still had a decent pair of boots. And a belt. And a coat. His shirt and pants, he reasoned, were pretty much ruined. But he still had things to steal. And he was helpless.

He shook his head. Three men, four if he included the driver, had stolen his watch and jewelry and slashed him open—probably for pennies. That bastard Cheviot had spent a few pennies and made him crawl. He could not doubt it was the viscount who had hired the thugs.

He panted like a dog as his rage poured adrenaline into his

veins. He gave one violent tug at the rope on his wrists, but the pain in his shoulder showed him the error of his ways. He could not hope to tear himself loose without doing himself real harm. Still, a growl ripped out of his throat.

It echoed in the dark street. It brought him to his senses. He closed his eyes against his rage. This was all futile. Moreover, it could get him killed. If he made noise or called for help, he would be at the mercy of whoever would come. The thought sobered him. He let his head roll back against the rough brickwork. Maybe he'd better get out and stand in the rain and cool off. He had come a long way from Texas with its wide blue skies and sun-drenched prairies.

That's the way, old son. Get going.

He used his anger to fuel his determination. He, Randolph MacPherson, was not going to die here in a dank, dark alley. Nor was his cousin Gill going to rot in some English prison.

He straightened away from the wall. *Walk!* he commanded himself. *Don't think about your chest or your shoulder. Think about that bastard Cheviot. Think about beating him to a pulp. Make me crawl, will he?*

"Walk," he said aloud. Rain wet his face. He licked his lips, taking in the moisture he found there. "Walk." *Until you meet someone who looks like he can be trusted enough to untie your hands.*

The night air cooled his hot face and ruffled his hair. It felt like a blessing and a promise. His bootheels sounded like pistol shots against the paving stones.

Chapter Nine

Again the Rescuer

Only the faintest of pinks lightened the sky above the black silhouettes of the city. The dark street was dank and wet from the night's intermittent rains. Dressed in her ragpicker's garb, Duchess made a shapeless shadow slipping down the dark street.

Her headlong flight to escape from Dogger had taken her farther into the maze of warehouses and loading sheds along the Thames dockside. When she was sure no one was following her, she had hidden herself in a packing crate and taken stock of her injuries. In them she had been fortunate. The pain in her arm and side had gradually ebbed until she was reasonably sure that nothing had been broken. She could deal with the most livid bruises for the couple of weeks they would take to heal.

Indeed they were the least of her wounds. Acute frustration not pain made her set her teeth as she climbed to her feet and slipped cautiously out into a wider thoroughfare. She had been led into a trap. Had Bert not been more than a match for the hoodlums Monro Taine had sent to catch her, she would have been taken to him. Where she would have ended the night, she could but guess. Only if she were lucky would it have been the Thames.

Angrily, she admitted to herself that for the near future Monro Taine had achieved his goal even though he had not caught her. She would bother him no more. She cared too much for Bert and Peter as well as herself to place them in such danger. They could have been beaten badly, perhaps to death.

More deeply than her own wounds, she regretted the girls that she could not rescue. Her spirits were at their lowest ebb. Tired, cold, and disappointed, she hurried along, eager to reach the flat before Pan awoke.

Head down, she was almost to the lamppost before she caught sight of a tall figure swaying beneath it.

Another drunk.

With a sneer of disgust, she hurried across the street. Her heels clicked on the pavement.

As she drew opposite, the figure shuddered and gave its head a violent shake. The shock of red hair glistening from a height well above six feet looked impossibly familiar. The figure was Rowdy MacPherson. Her first impulse was to run to his side. Then she hesitated. A drunken Texan might be just as bad as a drunken Cockney. Still—

—cautious, she kept the street between them.

“Rowdy? Rowdy MacPherson?”

The man did not straighten from his awkward hunched position against the lamppost. Instead, he tipped back his head and looked around. Finally, his eyes settled on her. “Ma’am?”

His voice was so hoarse that it shocked her. “Are you drunk or lost?”

“Ma’am?” He continued to stare in her direction. The thick hair fell over his eyes. He tossed his head. The movement made him reel. “Duchess?”

“That’s right.”

He managed a grin. She could see his teeth flash in the light. “You’ve been rescuing. I remember. That’s what you do. I’m sure glad to see you, ma’am.” He coughed and licked his lips. “I sure do need a rescuer.”

He must be very drunk. She approached with caution. “Er—where are your friends? I think I should tell you, you’ve wan-

dered into a dangerous part of London. You're running the risk of being robbed."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sure that's true." He cleared his hoarse throat. His hair flopped down in his eyes again. "Ma'am—Duchess—I'd sure appreciate it if you'd oblige me by untying my hands."

She stared at him as he twisted his body at an unnatural angle. Sure enough, his hands were bound behind him. "Dear heaven."

She ran across the street, then skidded to a halt as she saw the bloody mess of his chest. "Dear lord, what's happened to you?"

"Robbery." He cursed under his breath, then swayed and put his shoulder to the post. "I'd be much obliged if you'd—"

"Of course. Of course." She darted to his side and began to tug at the knots. The rope was new Indian hemp with fibers like spines. "Oh!"

"What's wrong?"

"It's—You're bleeding."

"If it makes you sick . . ." His voice was smothered.

"No. No. I'm all right. I won't be sick. It's just that your wrists are bleeding too. Perhaps you'd better sit down." His hands were a sight to make even the strongest draw back. Blood, some dried, some fresh, had stained every finger. She had to steel herself to touch them. Then she found she could not help him. She bent a fingernail back to the quick, but the knots held like iron. She repeated her suggestion. "This may take a long time. Perhaps you'd be more comfortable if you sat down."

"No, ma'am, Duchess. I don't think I'd better do that at all. I might not be able to get back up." His voice was so hoarse it was painful to listen to. By the gaslight, his face was like a deathmask, with sunken eyes and deep hollows beneath his cheekbones.

"Oh." She tore at the knots with renewed determination. A minute later she stilled her hands in impotent frustration. "Rowdy, I hate to have to tell you I can't budge the knots. I don't suppose you have a knife in your pocket."

He had stood still during her attempt, his head drooping. Now he shook it and tilted his head back on his shoulders. "No, ma'am, but—"

"Oh."

He slid down the pole and crumpled over on his side.

"Mr. MacPherson." She put her hand under him to prop him back up. "Rowdy!" Her fingers found the warm skin of his cheek, the heavy locks of waving red hair, almost black with moisture, and below them his chest. As he rolled over onto his back, his clothing fell open.

She screamed.

He looked as if he had been cut open.

"Rowdy! My God." Somehow she managed to keep her hold on his shoulder. If his skin had not been warm, she would have doubted that he lived. She wet the corner of her shawl in a puddle in the stone and washed his face. "Rowdy."

He stirred.

"You've got to get up," she whispered urgently. "You've got to."

She didn't know what had happened to him, but surely he had deadly enemies—enemies who might be searching for him to finish their dirty work. Oh, why had he collapsed under a lamppost? They were exposed here. And he was helpless.

He looked up at her with glazed eyes. Then his eyelids fluttered closed and his head rolled to the side.

She sat back on her haunches. This course of action was getting her nowhere. Stripping off her shawl she rolled it into a ball and put it under his cheek. It was little enough. If he regained consciousness, he would know she had not deserted him.

She pushed herself to her feet and hurried away.

DeCamp swallowed hard. Beneath his elegant clothing, sweat trickled down his back and under his armpits. Inwardly, he cursed. That he should have come to this. Prowling along the Thames dockside at night. Entering a ramshackle building. He felt himself sinking lower and lower. He had to have money.

"My God, Clarence! What sort of company you keep!" Cheviot's tone was bored as he fastidiously gathered his coat more closer around him.

"Shut up!" DeCamp snarled. "You need that sale. I need the money."

"I'm sure my way will get it," came the soft reply.

The room in which they found themselves was actually an office although a very shabby one. The air stank of mildew as well as the malodorous oil from a smoking lamp. As the minutes ticked by, the atmosphere became heavier. DeCamp's breath turned to a wheeze. He reached for a handkerchief just as a dark man, an Egyptian from the look of his liquid brown eyes and his red fez, opened a door and motioned them to follow.

Down the dark hall they went. The Egyptian opened a door at the end. The gambler and the viscount stepped through into the inner sanctum of Monro Taine.

The procurer leaned back, his fingers steepled. When no one moved, he barked, "So the job's done. Where's the two hundred pounds?"

"Two hundred pounds!" Cheviot looked at his companion. The angle of light showed every pore in DeCamp's skin as well as the perspiration that slicked it. "Do you mean this stunt cost you two hundred pounds? Seems to me that was an unwarranted outlay, Clarence—"

"Shut up." DeCamp shook himself free. Squaring his shoulders, he walked to the desk, letting his height intimidate the seated figure. "The fact is that you've caught us temporarily without funds. That's what the job was about."

"You ain't got the blunt." A skeletal hand docked the cigar ash out in a bronze ashtray. The sharp fingernails drummed an irritated rhythm on the scarred desk.

"MacPherson owes us a lot of money," the gambler explained. "He was being stubborn about paying. Now he'll ante up."

"I ain't a bloody collection agency. Cash on the barrelhead." Taine's voice was deceptively soft.

DeCamp felt dizzy. His spine began to prickle at the thought

of the Egyptian standing behind him in a dark corner. "You'll get your money. Double."

"Double of nothing ain't worth piss." Taine rose slowly.

Neither man facing him made the mistake of thinking that he was not dangerous. Fascinated, they watched the tiny bony figure with its pale cavernous cheeks and temples.

"You'll get your money," DeCamp repeated, swallowing hard. His whole head felt stuffed with cotton. His eyes were watering. "He's rich. A rich man's spoiled son."

"Like him?" Taine tossed a contemptuous glance at the viscount.

"Exactly." DeCamp took a step nearer the desk. "A pigeon waiting to be plucked, and when he's clean, we use him as bait for some more."

Cheviot might have been turned to stone. His lips were compressed, his nostrils pinched. He seemed barely to breathe as if he sought to take as little as possible of this tainted place away with him.

Taine puffed mightily on his cigar and blew a cloud of smoke into the stinging air. "Who is he?"

"An American. Rich and stupid." DeCamp allowed himself to smile faintly.

"Ah. Not too bad." Taine appeared to consider. At least he won't bring down Scotland Yard on our backs." His nails drummed again. "A week," he murmured. "Four hundred pounds." He spread his hand flat, each finger separated and lengthened by the stained yellow claws. "On the desk."

"It'll be here," DeCamp agreed. He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow.

"Wake up." A cool hand lifted Rowdy's cheek. Someone tugged at his shoulder. "Wake up. You've got to stand up and climb into the cab."

"An' be quick about it," came the driver's irritated admonition.

Rowdy groaned. "Leave me 'lone."

"No. You can't lie here on the wet street. It's too dangerous.

As it is, you're liable to take pneumonia." She tugged at his arm as she called to the driver. "Can't you help us? He's hurt."

"I ain't gettin' down off this box," came the reply.

Suddenly, Rowdy remembered. Everything. "Just let me get my breath," he groaned.

Duchess put her hands under his shoulder.

"No, Duchess. Don't hurt yourself. I can make it." He drew his long legs up under him, set his boot on the pavement. Grunting, he got up on one knee.

"One more try."

He took a deep breath and heaved himself to his feet. She slid her shoulder under his arm and he hugged her close to steady himself. The pain in his arms made him remember. "You got my hands free."

"Come on," she urged. "Just a couple of steps."

In the end she had put her shoulder against his buttocks and heave with all her might to stuff his body into the cab. Once inside he sprawled on the musty cushions, sweating and dizzy. "I'm grateful."

"You're welcome."

"Gimme back m' knife," the driver called.

Duchess climbed in beside the Texan and shook him sharply when he would have drifted off into unconsciousness. "Do you want a doctor?"

He opened his eyes and tried to concentrate. What he wanted was to go home to San Antonio. Since that was impossible, he tried to fix his mind on somewhere else. "The hotel. Take me back to the hotel."

"You should go to a doctor. You might be badly hurt."

The thoughts of another Englishman hurting him made him shudder weakly. "The hotel will be fine."

She leaned out the window of the cab. "The Ritz Hotel, driver."

Dimly, he was aware when she pulled him down onto her lap. Strange noises echoed and distorted in his ears. The cab creaked and the horse clopped along. He drifted in and out of consciousness.

Finally, he managed to whisper. "Duchess? Where'd you find me?"

"You were down among the warehouses a few blocks from the Thames."

As the morning light began to strengthen, she lifted his clothing away from the wound.

He caught the expression on her face. "Looks pretty bad, huh?" His voice gathered strength as his memory returned and fueled his anger. He took his right wrist in his left hand and rubbed it gingerly. "A bunch of owlhoots—three or four of them robbed me and sliced me up some and pitched me out when they were through with me."

"More than some, I'd say. You're going to need a doctor."

Despite her protests, he pushed himself up on his elbows and stared down at his front. A low whistle slid between his lips as he gingerly touched the wound. The weak sunlight of a London morning showed the white shirtfront shredded and gaping open. More than a couple of inches on each side of the frazzled edges were stiff and black and the whole front was spotted with droplets and gouts of blood the color of rust.

His skin beneath was smeared with the same rust. The wound itself seemed to be a thin line, mostly clotted, dividing him in two at the breastbone.

He swallowed hard. His stomach clenched. Weakness set his hands a-quiver. He squeezed his eyes tightly closed.

"Maybe you'd better lean back." Her voice sounded far off.

"I'll be all right. Just sort of shocked me. I'm sure praying that this looks worse than it is." He took a deep breath and opened his eyes, concentrating on her face. Then with cautious fingers he felt along the wound.

Face alight with sympathy, she watched him trace the wound's path down over his breastbone. Once he winced. "I think it's pretty shallow," he breathed. "At least so far." Then his fingers trailed deeper. "Uh-oh."

She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

MacPherson cursed softly. "It's deep. Another inch and he'd 've gutted me. I remember now. I thought I was a goner for sure."

She turned back, drawn almost against her will to the hollow beneath his ribs.

He lifted his fingers and studied them. A drop of blood fell from the tip of his index finger.

Then she managed a smile of consolation. "You must have walked some distance before I found you. If you can walk around, you're going to be all right. But your wound needs cleaning and bandaging."

He smiled back. "I'm thinking the same thing, ma'am." He left off his explorations and began to struggle with his topcoat.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to ask you to do me one more big favor."

She looked at him suspiciously. "What?"

"Just help me get this buttoned up."

Suddenly, she knew what he was going to ask of her. "You want me to help you walk through the hotel lobby and up to your room, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She shook her head, "Why don't you go in by yourself? Just stagger right up to the desk and set them running around for doctors? They'll send for the Metropolitan Police or Scotland Yard. They'll even have your clothes cleaned and mended."

"Because I don't want anyone to know I'm hurt," he gasped. His efforts to get his heavy coat straightened had left him exhausted. The face he raised to her was pale, with dark hollows in the cheeks and around the eyes. His forehead was creased in pain.

She looked at him incredulously. "What do you mean?"

He leaned back with his eyes closed. "I've made some folks mighty mad. I just didn't figure out how mad they were until tonight. Looks like you folks play real tough over here. I've got to get a whole lot tougher if I'm going to play with you."

She could not deny his assertions. In her life in the streets, she had had surprisingly few dealings with men. She knew knife fights occurred. But she had never seen one, nor, in this case, the results of one. "So someone set these men on you."

"That's right. This was sort of a warning."

She stirred uncomfortably. She had had a warning too. She

wondered what would have happened if Dogger had caught her. The thought made her sick.

Rowdy opened his eyes. "So I'll be much obliged if you'll have the driver let us off at the side door and you'll go in with me."

He could see the color rush into her cheeks. She pressed her lips tightly together.

"Duchess. Evelyn. I'm real sorry. You being a lady and all, but I don't think I can make it up the stairs without you."

"Of course not. I—"

He leaned forward earnestly. "Miss Smythe. I have the greatest respect for you in the world. I know you're not a prostitute. I know that's what that door and those stairs are for. I'd never ask you to go in at it if there were any other way. It's just that I'd like to keep this quiet."

"I still don't see that telling the hotel manager would create a problem. He's been trained to be the soul of discretion." She looked at Rowdy suspiciously. Perhaps this cowboy from Texas was not what he claimed to be.

"I'm sure he would be with most people. But with some . . ." He shook his head, remembering the key to Gill's room. "He'd cave in like a rotten well cover."

"Why is that so important?"

"Ever see a flock of baby chicks?"

She shook her head helplessly.

"If one gets sick or hurt, the others 'll pick it to death." He directed his most penetrating stare in her direction. "Get my drift?"

She shivered. "I think I do."

"I didn't think you'd have any trouble. If they know they've hurt me, they'll come looking to pick me to death."

The cab pulled to a halt in front of the Ritz. Rowdy looked out. The uniformed doorman had already taken his place. He opened the door for a couple of elderly gentlemen in long frock coats with astrakhan collars to start their morning constitutional.

"Shide doorsh." He rapped on the side of roof of the cab with his knuckles and slurred his words in imitation of a drunk.

"Yes, sir." The driver whistled softly to the horse.

* * *

The pair met one servant after another—chambermaids with armloads of linen, valets with shining shoes and freshly pressed clothes, waiters with silver trays of tea and rolls.

"I'm sorry," Rowdy muttered. "God, I didn't have any idea . . ."

Duchess accepted the carefully veiled stares with some equanimity. Under other circumstances the whole thing might have been an occasion for laughter. She was dressed as an old woman and a dirty one to boot. If he only knew, the stares they drew were probably directed at him and his peculiar tastes. She squeezed his arm reassuringly. "It's all right. They've never seen me before."

"Of course not. They've never seen your like." Rowdy stopped apologizing and resorted to muttering under his breath. The back stairs were naturally narrower than the grand staircases he was used to. He had started up using his right hand on the banister and his left hand on the opposite wall.

When they began to encounter hotel employees, he was forced to crowd Duchess and put his arm around her shoulder to steady himself.

They passed a haughty valet, a gentleman's gentleman of the first water who actually made a moue of disgust as he brushed by them.

"Damn," Rowdy muttered louder than before. "That last one needs that expression mashed down his throat."

"Sssh. Don't," Duchess cautioned. The stairs and Rowdy's considerable weight were taking her breath away. "What's your room number?"

"Thirty-six."

"Good. Here we are."

Once inside Rowdy took two staggering steps, turned half around, and collapsed across the bed with a deep groan. There he lay breathing hard, his face shiny with perspiration. "The last mile's always the hardest."

"We couldn't have made it a mile," she contradicted, leaning back against the door to catch her breath.

From the bed he turned the full force of his smile on her. "I'm sure grateful, Duchess Evelyn Smythe. And I'd like to say, you'll sure do to ride the river with."

Unaccountably pleased even though she was not sure of the exact nature of the compliment, she crossed to the bedside carafe and poured them both glasses of water. "Can you drink this by yourself?"

He tried to sit up but slumped back. "In a minute."

She drank her own down, then came around and sat down at his head. Sliding one arm under his neck, she propped him up and held the water to his lips.

He drank gratefully then nodded toward the wardrobe. "There's some whiskey in the bottom drawer over there."

"Do you think you should have any? You're hot. You're liable to be feverish."

"Duchess, if I'm feverish, I'm going to need all the pepping up I can get."

She left his side to bend over the drawer he indicated. There beneath the neatly folded shirts, each matched with its detachable collars and cuffs, was a silver flask and a leather belt.

Clutching the flask against her bosom, she gaped at the other thing. Encircling its tooled surface, each pushed through a small loop, was a row of bullets, the first she had ever seen. The whole was wrapped tightly around a holster. Sticking out of the top of the bundle was the carved bone handle of a pistol.

He lay silent for a moment. "Maybe you'd better bring my gun too."

"I can't." She shook her head decidedly. "I've never touched a gun before. I've never even seen one."

"It's not loaded, so it can't hurt you. Bring it here."

"I don't think—"

He sat up with a groan, holding his head and swaying. "Listen, Duchess, I've been robbed, cut down the middle, booted out of the back of a wagon, and played for a sucker. My cousin's been arrested and thrown in jail because he knocked an intruder out of his room. I don't know what's going on here, but from now on I'm not going around without one."

The weight of the gun shocked her. She had no idea some-

thing so small could be so heavy. It could easily slip into a portmanteau. Inwardly quaking, she hefted it. It was steel and bone and lead and brass. She was terrified of it. It could be her death. She did not even know the proper way to point it. "No one in England carries a gun."

He took it from her by the bone handle, his filthy hand closing over it with easy familiarity. "That may be the first good news I've heard in a long time. Might give me an advantage. Right now, I'm outnumbered and the Apaches are closing in."

She watched as he hitched himself around until he could loop it over the bedpost. There he arranged it, so the handle was in easy reach of his hand. Then he drew it out a couple of times for practice. When he was satisfied, he sank back on the pillow with a sigh.

"I'll ring for the housekeeper. You need a doctor." She made a move toward the bellpull.

"No. I don't want anyone."

He was making her angry. "You have a terrible wound," she said sternly. "You need it washed and probably stitched up."

He shook his head. "It'll be all right. If it hasn't killed me now, it's not going to." From beneath gold-tipped lashes he regarded her. "I don't suppose I could get you to help me? You being a rescuer and all."

He was definitely feeling better. He was half dead and he was being charming. She drew in her breath sharply. "I've rescued you. It's not my job to nurse you back to health."

He held out an imploring hand. Then clenched it and dropped it down in his lap. It was a grisly sight. One more time she tried to get him to send for a doctor, but he paid no attention. With a sigh, he clenched his jaw and pushed himself up in bed. Eyes fixed on her, he began to pull the remains of the shirt from his pants. A bead of bright red appeared instantly in the hollow below his ribcage.

"Oh, stop. Lie back down. You've started to bleed again."

He froze, staring down at himself. His arms flopped onto the bed beside him. He looked up at her again through his lashes. "Please, Duchess. I'm desperate. You're just about the

only person I trust to help me. If you'll just do this one little favor for me, I'll never ask another. Just help me get out of these things. Please."

He was breaking down her resistance. She tried one more time. "I don't undress strange men."

"Hell, Duchess, we've been tripping over each other for almost a week. We're practically engaged."

Despite her exhaustion, the words made her quiver. "Put like that, I supposed you have a point."

He flashed a strained grin. "Duchess, if you'll just help me get a few of my clothes off, I can take care of the rest." He gestured toward the gory mess smeared down his chest. "Most stuff like this just needs being still until it takes time to heal."

"What about infection?" She took a step closer and peered at the lower part of the wound.

He flicked the tail of the ruined linen. "As much as I've bled, I've pretty well cleaned it out."

She stared at him. Despite his smiles and his cajoling, his face was gray around the mouth. His blue-green eyes stood out starkly above the purple smudges that showed on his fair skin. His lips were cracked and bitten. But he would not quit, would not sink back and call for help. Spoiled young scion he might be, but he had courage and strength.

With a shrug she picked up the pitcher and basin from the washstand. "Lie down. I assume the bath is at the end of the hall."

A bright smile lit his whole face. "Yes, ma'am."

With hot water and clean towels, she started at the base of his throat. Privately, she marveled at his size. His shoulders were too large for the pillow. His feet hung over the side of the bed. And his skin. White as milk with a sheen like satin, liberally sprinkled with curling red hair as fiery as the thatch on his head. Below his ribcage the hair thinned out into an arrow that disappeared beneath his belt buckle.

Her heart thudded in her throat and strange sensual heat rose

in her cheeks as she passed the cloth over the hard planes, the pink flat nipples, the curves of his ribcage.

The sight and scent and texture of his big body were having a dizzying effect on her senses. She had never seen a half-nude man before. She had certainly never run her hands over his chest and shoulders with only a thin washcloth covering her fingers.

The wound down the breastbone was already closed and scabbed over. He betrayed no discomfort until she came to the one in his lean belly. Instant pity chilled her as she confirmed his diagnosis. "This is deep."

He gritted his teeth. "Yes, ma'am. That bushwhacking Dogger got a kick out of doing that."

"Dogger?"

His eyes flew open. "Friend of yours?"

"Unless there are two men named Dogger, he tried to beat my brains out tonight."

"Uh-huh. They tossed me out of the wagon after they'd robbed and cut me. Said they had other business." The Texan lay back, his eyes fixed on the butt of the .45. A muscle jumped in his jaw. "What's he got against you?"

She sponged and sponged. Finally he was clean, and only a bare inch of the wound, the very last inch, oozed blood sluggishly. She tried once more. "This really needs a doctor."

"It'll close up on its own," he declared confidently. "Just make a pad and we'll buckle my belt around me to hold it. Once you help me take off my boots and pants."

"Pants!" She felt herself blushing.

He regarded her with a serious expression. "I'm sorry to ask you to do that, Duchess, you being a gentle lady and all. But you can spread a sheet over me and just sort of pull them off. That won't offend your modesty, will it?"

"No. Of course not." She dropped the washcloth into the basin and turned her face away toward the foot of the bed. The thought of Rowdy MacPherson lying naked in front of her, even under a sheet, made her blush. Perhaps if he were a man of slighter build, she would not feel so confused. But he was

so big. Those big hands with their long fingers. She shivered. They could encompass her waist.

She made a little ceremony of tugging off his cowboy boots, huge black things with great chocks of heels and barbaric gray and white stitching like flames running up the sides. She set the first one on the floor beside the bed. When she set down the other, she made sure that it was positioned exactly beside the first.

Then she looked at him over the tent his long feet made in the bed.

He grinned encouragingly as he propped himself up on his elbows. "I'm ready."

She reached beneath the covers. Her hands touched his ankles. Even through the socks, she could feel their heat. She took a good grip.

"Ready."

She tugged first one leg and then the other and he rolled from one hip to the other. In the end it was so ridiculously easy that she hardly had time to be embarrassed.

Finally, he was comfortable. As comfortable as a man could be with a two-foot cut down his chest and a leather belt wrapped tight around his middle. As comfortable as a man could be lying aslant the mattress with his feet hanging over the foot of the bed and his head butting the headboard.

Duchess straightened her aching back and smothered a yawn. The first streams of early morning sunlight cast lacy patterns on the wall behind his bed. Exhaustion threatened to lay her low. She felt the throb of her own bruises. How many hours ago had she found him wavering against the lamppost?

"I have to leave now."

His eyes flew open. "Don't go."

She frowned at him. "There's nothing more I can do for you. You're here. You're bathed. You're bandaged. I'm tired."

"Please, Duchess. I need someone to talk to. I—I need advice."

Really. As if he hadn't imposed upon her enough. "I suggest you call in Scotland Yard or a good solicitor. I'm just a woman. I wouldn't know anything about men's affairs. Besides I have

responsibilities. Pansy will be up and I won't be there to take her to school. She'll be frantic."

He glanced at the windows. "I'd check my watch if I could, but it was stolen. But I calculate it's going on nine o'clock. Your little girl's already gone to school. She won't be getting out for hours. Am I right?"

Duchess bit her lip in aggravation, unable to think of a good quick excuse.

He pulled the second pillow behind his head and punched them both into a knot. "You've been so all fired anxious to ring that bell. Why don't you ring for somebody to come up and take an order? I bet we'll both feel better for some breakfast."

Amazed at his resilience, she could think of no reason not to obey.

He grinned. "Why don't you slip down the hall and wash up yourself? I've probably bled some on you. You'll feel better and then you won't be embarrassed when the fellow comes."

It was her chance to slip away. She started for her hat and coat, but he shook his finger at her. "Unh-uh. They'll be safe right here."

Shooting him a resentful glance, she swept out of the room. The water was hot; the soap, soft; and the towels, fluffy. The temptation was there to take a full bath, but she resisted it.

Instead she locked the door and began to unbutton her blouse. Before the gilt-edged mirror, she stripped to the waist and washed herself all over. She was startled when she saw the bruise over her ribs. In her concern for Rowdy, she had completely forgotten her own injury. Next, she let down her hair and combed it out with her fingers before braiding it and twisting it around her head in a coronet.

Afterward, she stared at herself in the mirror. Her skin was white and clear. Her breasts small, each peaked with a dark rosy crown. They tingled at the memory of Rowdy MacPherson's flat pink nipples. A blush rose to her cheeks. She was not controlling her thoughts at all. What did she think she was doing? She wanted to look nice for a young man. She wanted him to admire her. Blushing with embarrassment at the wide brown eyes and

the hopeful expression she saw in them, she hid her face in her hands.

He was handsome and polite. He treated her as if he respected her. She wanted him to want her. She should leave, but she wanted to stay, to prolong the moments with him. They were the first exciting moments she had ever had. In all her seventeen years she had never felt like this, never thought such feelings could come to her. Her attitudes toward herself had changed radically in the last week and all because of Rowdy MacPherson.

Sternly, she caught herself up. He was a foreigner. She was an outcast, neither inside nor outside society. She existed in a kind of limbo. If Monro Taine had his way, she would not exist much longer.

She would go back and listen to this young man and offer advice if she could see any course that might improve his predicament. She would eat his food and pour him another drink of whiskey. She would be daring and perhaps give him a kiss. Then she would leave as quickly as she could. Hopefully, he would remember her with gratitude.

Duchess had no place in her life for cowboys from Texas in America.

Chapter Ten

The Alliance

"Come on in. I was getting worried about you."

Rowdy MacPherson smiled at her from the bed where an accommodating servant of the hotel had propped him up with several extra pillows behind his back. He had donned a shirt without the starched collar and buttoned it up to his throat to conceal his wound. The complement of creamy white skin and white linen was so breathtaking that she had trouble remembering that he was horribly wounded beneath the garment.

The same servant had rolled a breakfast cart beside the bed. A chair for Duchess had been pulled up beside it.

"I told them to bring the coffee and tea right on up and the rest of the stuff as soon as they got it fixed." Rowdy spread his arms in an expansive gesture.

The sight of those long arms stretching out over six feet from tip to tip made her catch her breath. Had they really agreed to part forever only a couple of days ago? Since their supper together, she had spent so much time with him that she knew she would feel lost without him.

Hastily, she dropped her eyes to the gleaming silver service. A moment later she raised them, chiding herself for her silliness. She was blushing like a Victorian maiden—which she was. But she hated to admit to being one. Instead she made a face

at him. "You look like you've just waked up from a long night's sleep, but I know you haven't slept at all. How can you feel so well?"

His smile widened into a grin that displayed his strong white teeth. "I told you it wasn't much more than a long scratch. And as for staying out all night. I'm used to long hours riding nightherd on the roundups. After breakfast I'll roll up and sleep, and tomorrow I'll be right as rain."

She approached the bed reluctantly. "I think you're exaggerating. You were badly hurt. You need to rest."

He indicated the chair again. "You sound just like my mama. I promise I'll rest later. Why don't you sit down and help yourself? You and I have got to plan."

The smell of the coffee was making her mouth water even though she preferred tea. She seated herself and lifted the smaller silver pot. "I can't think how I can be of help to you, but I'll be happy to pour. Do you take cream and sugar?"

"Coffee. Black." He leaned back against the pillows. His eyes surveyed her lazily, noting that she had bathed and arranged her hair. She was incredible. Despite her own lack of sleep, her skin was luminous, creamy like a magnolia, with a faint blush over her aristocratic cheekbones. Her eyes were dark, dark brown surrounded by long black lashes. Beneath them were a testimony to her long night, pale mauve smudges that made the eyes all the more hypnotic.

He blinked as she squared her chin, assuming a more determined look. Her mouth was wide and generous, eminently kissable. As he stared at the curve of her lips, he wanted to kiss them and be kissed by them. The thought started a faint throbbing in his groin.

He hadn't slept in twenty-four hours. He'd been knocked on the head, cut, and thrown out of a wagon, but he wasn't anywhere near dead. He smiled at her. "You washed your face."

The spout of the coffeepot clacked against the lip of the cup. "I—I felt—er—that is, I was feeling sleepy. It helped to wake me up."

"Uh-huh." His voice sounded just as lazy as his eyes. "Your hair looks real nice."

Her hand bobbled. The coffee splashed over the side of the cup. Quickly, she blotted the saucer with a napkin. "I—It was coming down."

"You didn't have to put it up. Girls in Texas wear their hair down about as much as they wear it up. I like it long." He took the cup she passed him. "I know how long it is. Remember."

Suddenly, the hotel room seemed smaller and very warm. She became aware of the long shapes of his legs beneath the sheet. They lay relaxed and sprawled apart. A vision of what they might look like bare flashed through her mind. His skin would be satiny pale with a faint tracing of blue veins and a heavy sprinkling of red hair. The powerful thigh and calf muscles developed to control a horse—

Concealing a shiver, she directed what she hoped was an accusing stare. "You knocked my hat off on purpose."

"Hey. I'm just a big clumsy galoot. But sometimes I get lucky." He chuckled as he raised his coffee to his lips. "Damn, that sure goes down good." Beneath the covers, he cocked one ankle over his knee and rested his cup and saucer on his thigh.

More warmth flooded her cheeks. Behind her own teacup, she mentally scolded herself for letting his body cause such confusion. She must think of something else. Tearing her eyes away from his lap, she stared at the contentment she saw in his face. Though dark circles lay beneath his eyes and a stubble of fine red-gold hair had cropped out on his jaw, he looked ready for anything. "Rowdy—"

He interrupted her. "The truth is, Duchess, I need your help and I think you need me too. Why don't you tell me a little bit about what's going on here? Your little girl said you were a rescuer. Besides me, who do you rescue?"

His questions were getting closer and closer to her personal life. With reticence born of years of depending solely on herself, she had resisted telling anyone, much less a man and a foreigner, anything about herself. "I thought we were going to talk about you and what kind of trouble you're in."

Gingerly, he leaned forward to hold out his empty cup. "I think it would be better if we circled around and came up on

the back side of that. Let's just say I've made some hombres mighty mad. What about you?"

She poured him more coffee. As she passed it to him, her dark eyes locked with his blue ones. "I've made at least one man 'mighty mad' too."

"So we've got a mutual enemy?"

"Probably not. Dogger works for different people. I know Monro Taine wants me. I don't think he would want you. Why should he? You're no threat to him or his business, are you?" She looked at him questioningly.

Rowdy shrugged. "Depends on what his business is."

She saw no way to avoid the question. "He's a procurer."

"Uh-huh!" Rowdy whistled through his teeth. "Well, that sort of gives a clue as to who you're rescuing. As for me, I don't see the connection. The fact of the matter is that I turned thumbs down on those cattle the viscount was so anxious to sell me. After you all left, the weekend turned out real bad. Gil and I couldn't wait to get off the place. Now my cousin's in jail for attacking him after he sneaked into his room."

His turquoise eyes glittered with anger. "This is supposed to be the best hotel in the world, but some buzzard down at that front desk gave Cheviot the key to Gill's room. I just can't feature it."

She set her tea down and folded her hands. Her dark eyes focused on the light softly gleaming from the curve of the silver teapot. "The world thinks Queen Victoria has reformed England. Isn't that what you Americans all think? The British Empire sets the standard for the English-speaking world. Everyone in England must be very straitlaced and corseted, upright and morally good because the good Queen demands it? Well, the good Queen has been locked up in Windsor Castle for over twenty years. I've never even seen her.

"And let me tell you, most Englishmen do exactly what they please. From the best hotels to the slums in Soho and Whitechapel. From the Houses of Parliament to the brothels across the river. You can't imagine how much the rich and well-to-do get away with."

He looked at her in amazement, the soft curve of her jaw, the slender column of her neck. He watched her swallow.

"Young girls, some bad, some good, some as young as Pansy, are being sold into what amounts to slavery by Monro Taine and others like him. He drugs them, he kidnaps them. Some he sells to brothels here in London, some he smuggles onto ships that take them to France and Germany. From there they could be sent anywhere. Last night I heard about a shipment that was being sent to the slave markets of Morocco."

Rowdy interrupted her tirade. "Hold on. You're saying he kidnaps them. What about the law? Even I've heard of Scotland Yard and Sir Robert Peel."

She brushed his statement aside with a pitying look. "You're years behind the times. He's dead. And Scotland Yard Detective Inspectors are a few good men in the ranks of a lot of bad ones. The bad ones are in the pockets of every brothel keeper and every casino owner. And they're protected by every politician who's a silent partner with them."

She leaned forward earnestly. "That's why so many terrible things aren't against the law. A newspaperman, William Stead, proved how young girls were being sold and smuggled out of the country. He wrote about it in his newspaper and do you know what the courts did? They sent him to jail."

She realized that her voice had risen and her hands were clenched around her napkin. Hurriedly, she relaxed and smoothed out the crumpled material.

"And you rescue some of these girls?"

"That's right. I can't do much, but I do what I can. Taine doesn't like my interference. He sent a warning. Last night, he set a trap. But I got away." She looked down at her clenched fists. "I just hope my men did."

Rowdy looked at her with admiration. "I'll be damned—pardon me, Duchess. But I sure do need you to take care of me. You got away scot-free and I got beaten up and cut."

She looked at him appraisingly. "I got knocked about a bit too."

Rowdy's eyes flicked over her in alarm. For the first time

he looked beyond her incredible beauty. Were there injuries concealed by the shabby clothing? "Duchess?"

"Just a bruise," she assured him. "I caught him by surprise. And I was lucky."

He ran his hand down his shirtfront. "I was too, but luck doesn't hold forever."

"No," she agreed. "Luck doesn't hold forever."

They looked at each glumly.

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly.

"Seventy-five."

For an instant he gaped. Then he pointed a long index finger at her. "You got me. I had you figured for eighty. Begging your pardon, Duchess. I should have known better than to ask a lady her age."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

She had been very close in her appraisal. Even though he was six years older than she, he acted very innocent. She thought of a lumbering Saint Bernard puppy as he raked his hand through his thick hair. The movement disarranged the fresh combing he had given it. It flopped over his forehead. His next words made him seem even younger.

"Like I told you before, my papa put a lot of faith in me when he sent me and Gill on this trip. He gave us a lot of money and told us to come back with some new breeding stock. This is my first big responsibility."

"But you've run into difficulties."

He clenched his fist in the sheet. "Hell. If we'd got caught in a Texas twister, we'd 've had it all."

She laughed. "I don't understand half of what you're saying. As Pansy says, 'You sure use funny words.'"

He barely managed an acknowledgment as he set the coffee aside. Before her eyes, his stalwart frame seemed to give in to despair. His shoulders slumped. He pulled his long legs up under the sheet and draped his arms across his knees. "When I met that viscount, I figured he was just what the doctor ordered. I checked up on him. They'd been breeding Herefords

for years. I'd seen pictures of that bull in the catalogs. His family had a big spread that they'd been on a long time."

"Oh, yes," Duchess said bitterly. "That's the one thing we have over here in England. Big 'spreads' that we've been on a long time. And we have lovely manners and ancient titles, but frequently we don't have anything but the land. Our manners cover sins so black that we'd sell our own children to—to"—she put her hand to her throat as if the words were choking her.—"to preserve our ancient title. And we think nothing of fleecing any green young man who comes to town."

He looked at her narrowly, sensing that she was not necessarily talking about his problem. "Lord Cheviot and his gambler friend Clarence DeCamp were out to fleece me for sure." He heaved a sigh. "It didn't take a genius to figure out that I was supposed to lose a lot of money to DeCamp and then pay top dollar to Cheviot for a young Hereford bull and some cows and maybe a horse or two that looked pretty good and then skedaddle for home with a lot of scraggly stuff. But I wouldn't cooperate. I don't gamble with anything I can't afford to lose. And then I checked out the stock. It wasn't any good."

"So he put your cousin in jail."

"I imagine I can buy his way out." In frustration Rowdy jabbed one clenched fist into his other hand. "The charges will probably be dropped the minute my check clears the bank."

"Then why pay to have you beaten up?"

Rowdy looked thoughtful. "The viscount's papa is out of the country. I kind of think he wouldn't exactly approve of what his son's doing. I probably wasn't moving fast enough for him. I suppose he could have hired Dogger."

"Oh, never." Duchess made a moue of disdain. "Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot would never hire tradesmen and sully his hands with filthy lucre. Nor would the Honorable Clarence, though he's nothing but a gambler. One of them, probably the Honorable, hired an intermediary—Monro Taine."

"So we've got a common enemy."

"I would say so."

"So I'll help you and you help em. Is it a deal?" He thrust out his big hand.

She stared at it. If she believed in fate, she would believe that forces beyond her control were driving her toward this man. A chill prickled the flesh on her arms. She pushed back the chair and started to rise. "I don't think so. I don't make deals with men."

"No, wait. Listen—"

A knock sounded at the door.

"Breakfast," he declared. "It's about time. I'm about starved to death." He started to call out, but she pointed to herself and shook her head.

He grinned in perfect understanding. A jerk of his head indicated the dressing screen. When her skirts disappeared behind it, he called, "Come on in."

Clarence DeCamp flung the door open and ushered Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot through.

Quick as a striking rattler, Rowdy pulled his .45 and thumbed the hammer back.

The viscount's chilly countenance stiffened, but he held his ground. DeCamp flattened himself against the door. His eyes bugged at the sight of the big .45.

"What the hell do you two want?" Rowdy trained his sights on Cheviot's chest.

The viscount's face turned an unpleasant shade of gray. "Er—we—came to inquire, old man. That is, we heard—"

Somewhere in the stammering words, DeCamp found his nerve. "Put that away!" he ordered sternly. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "You're in a civilized country."

"Not so as I could tell," Rowdy replied, easing the hammer back down. Far from lowering the barrel of his pistol, he raised it, so that it was trained just past Cheviot's shoulder. If he squeezed the trigger, the bullet would pass under DeCamp's very nose. "You fellas wouldn't believe what happened last night."

Both men grew very still.

The gambler's lips pulled back from his teeth in a humorless grin. He eyed the pristine shirtfront, the long limbs sprawled beneath the sheet. "Why don't you tell us?"

Rowdy looked the two up and down. A hot anger coupled with a tingling excitement coursed through his veins. The two had come expecting him to crawl. He smothered a smile. Man alive! He would enjoy disappointing them. He hoped Duchess was listening behind that screen. He would show her that she needed to team up with him. He settled his face into its most humorless cast, from his father's favorite intimidating expression.

Cheviot's face turned gray. DeCamp pressed himself more tightly against the door.

"Some owlhoots ambushed me, right here on the streets of your big civilized town. Course they got more than they bargained for." Rowdy patted the pistol in his lap. "But it was touch and go for a few minutes there."

"So you managed to fight them off?" DeCamp made no effort to conceal the disappointment. "But how badly were you hurt?"

"Who? Me? Not a bit. But those hombres . . ." He chuckled. "They're going to be stepping mighty soft for a long time."

"You didn't shoot them?" Cheviot's voice wavered. His skin pulled tighter than ever over his face. He did not share DeCamp's contempt for human life.

Rowdy let his eyes run contemptuously over them. They were lowlifes despite their fancy titles. He shook his head. "I didn't have my .45 with me. Otherwise, they'd be pushing up daisies."

"And they didn't hurt you!" DeCamp actually took a step toward the bed. "But we heard—"

"What'd you hear?" Rowdy asked pleasantly.

Cheviot put a warning hand on the gambler's arm. "To tell the truth, we didn't hear anything—until we came to the hotel. They were all buzzing about it downstairs."

Rowdy regarded them steadily. "The hotel doesn't know anything."

"Of course not." DeCamp snarled. His face was red with anger. Rowdy would bet all the gambler owed him that he was the one who'd hired Dogger. "Don't be an ass, Cheviot. The

hotel doesn't know anything because there isn't anything to know. Our friend wasn't hurt."

Rowdy lowered the gun to bear on Cheviot's chest. "I hope you've brought my cousin with you."

The viscount's actually moved his silk top hat across his chest. Slim as a blade, he nevertheless stood his ground. "Your cousin attacked me. Without provocation. In front of witnesses."

"You broke into his room," Rowdy argued. "When I find out who slipped you that key, you'll be in big trouble."

A discreet knock at the door went unheard.

DeCamp faltered, but Cheviot lifted his chin stubbornly. "This can all get very, very messy, or it may be settled amicably. Your best hope is to pay for the cattle you contracted for and take them and yourselves back to the savage continent you came from."

Behind the dressing screen, a metal pan clattered to the floor. All three men jumped.

DeCamp rallied. "Entertaining someone, were you? Some street tart no doubt. You really ought to take care, MacPherson. You'll take a disease—or pass one on."

Another knock.

"Get out!" Rowdy sat up straight in bed, the bore of his Colt .45 fanned back and forth from one to the other. "Get out of this room!"

Both men retreated in time to tumble across a fully laden teacart wheeled in through the door by a waiter from the hotel dining room. China and crystal crashed to the floor as the gambler windmilled his arms. A sterling silver cover and chafing dish clanked against the wall, its contents tipping onto the Oriental carpet.

Lord Cheviot surveyed the melee. His mouth thinned at the sight of DeCamp struggling among the dishes and spilled food. He glared at the Texan.

Rowdy MacPherson laughed. "I'd hit the trail if I were you."

Cheviot nodded. Clearly nothing could be gained by staying. "Your friend is still in jail," he said clearly. "Remember that, MacPherson."

He pushed past the waiter and strode away. The servant

stared hypnotized at the Texan's .45. His mouth hung agape, his eyes bugged. He took a backward step.

"Hold it. Don't go running off now," Rowdy said. He pointed the gun at Clarence DeCamp. "See if you can salvage our breakfast. This gentleman's leaving. Aren't you, hombre?"

With a sneer the gambler pushed himself off the table and strode away down the hall.

The waiter still stood as if hypnotized.

"The meal," Rowdy prodded gently. "Our food." Not until he had returned the gun to the holster did the other man move to restore some sort of order with shaking hands.

Rowdy had insisted on putting on his robe and slippers and sitting up in a chair.

The waiter had placed the remnants of the meal and service pieces on the table and arranged chairs on either side of it. By the time he had cleaned up the mess and departed with the carts, Rowdy and Duchess were so hungry they fell upon the food.

"I apologize for the noise." Duchess spooned marmalade over the melting butter on a scone. "I was trying to peek between the panels and I backed into the washstand."

"No harm done." Rowdy forked up a dripping bite of his second egg. "I was getting ready to send them skedaddling anyway."

"They've really got your friend in trouble," Duchess observed. "It's his word against theirs. They could accuse him of anything. Cheviot is nothing, a little hanger-on in the younger set, but the Earl of Audley is very powerful."

Rowdy put the fork down. "And in the meantime, they'll come after me again."

"And me. We're back where we started." She looked at the polished bone pistolgrip sticking out of the tooled-leather holster. "Would you really have shot them?"

His blue eyes flashed. "No, ma'am. They weren't packing guns. I wouldn't shoot an unarmed man. No matter how much he might deserve it."

She smiled at his earnestness. "Would you shoot Dogger?"

"Hell, yes. Pardon my language. That hombre had better lay low. He carries a big knife. If I ever catch sight of him again, I'll make him sorry he was ever born." He brandished his knife before cutting with unnecessary violence into a slice of ham.

Duchess folded her napkin and leaned back in her chair. Now that she had eaten, tiredness flowed through her limbs in a great warm tide. She stifled a yawn. "Listen, Rowdy. If you want my advice, the thing for you to do would be to go to your consul. He'll intercede for you or introduce you to some important men who can."

He looked at her speculatively. "How about the duke?"

"The duke?" She frowned, trying to recall the names of various royal personages.

"Your Duke."

She hesitated. Her whole body went still. "I don't have a duke. Duchess is just a name people gave me. I liked it so I kept it."

He relaxed slightly. One never knew about beautiful women. Although he had guessed that Pansy was not her child, it relieved his mind to know that no male relative was in the picture. "Because you were so beautiful?"

She pulled a fright face at him. "Exactly."

Chuckling, he leaned forward to touch her cheek with his thumb. "Because you *are* so beautiful."

The words, the touch broke apart the contentment that had settled over them with warmth and food. Suddenly, they became self-conscious. They were two young and beautiful people of the opposite sex in the same hotel room. One of them was practically naked beneath a bathrobe.

"I think I'd better go." She started to rise.

He put his hand over hers. "No. Don't. I'll behave. I know my manners." He leaned back. "Stay with me and help me. I swear to you I'll take care of this hombre . . ."

"Monro. Monro Taine." She stared into the unwavering eyes. Though he was younger in some ways than she, Duchess felt a surge of confidence in his words. They were more than a promise. A vow had been made. "What would you do? No one

knows where to find him. He gives orders to people who give orders to more people."

Rowdy rose from his chair and pulled out hers for her to rise. He towered head and shoulders above her. In fact, if he had held out his arm, she would have been able to step beneath it.

"The way I see this is I've got two things to do. I've got to get Gill out of jail. That's number one. For number two, I've got to be sure that I don't buy a herd of scrub stock to take back to Texas. My papa would be mighty disappointed in me. And I'm just not going to let that happen."

"Those are good goals." She complimented him.

"Thank you." He held out his hand to lead her away from the breakfast table.

"You're welcome." She placed her hand in his. His was warm and calloused. It held hers so sweetly, so firmly, yet so gently. She could feel the warmth penetrating down to her toes. She looked down at the hands. Their warmth was doing strange things to her belly.

"I think you'll be able to achieve them with just a little bit of help from the American consul." She was surprised to find that her voice was suddenly hoarse. She could not bring herself to take back her hand.

He had led her to the chair beside the bed, but she had not sat down. He bent his head to look into her face. His voice was honey, warm and deep. "I don't think so. I can't believe that fella will be able to help me the way you can. I think I need you to come along with me and keep me steady."

"You don't need me." She turned her face away, afraid he could read her emotional distress. Even as she spoke, she acknowledged that she wanted to stay with him. She wanted to see the adventure through to the end.

"Yes, I do." He took both her hands in one of his and used his other to tip her face back. "You're a rescuer. And I need rescuing. You go with me in polite society. Help me sniff out the grifters. And when we're done—I swear to you—before I leave London, I'll take care of Monro Taine for you."

She looked hard at him. "You'd shoot him?"

He smiled that lazy teasing smile. "If I have to, but to tell the truth, I'd rather just ship him off to Mexico. I've got some amigos down there that'd be right happy to put an hombre like that to work breaking rocks."

The idea of a London without Monro Taine was eminently satisfying. "How will you find him?"

"Just like tracking a cougar to his den. Start with the kill and work backwards. He's left a trail if we know how to read it. Each one of those hombres knows the man who hired him. It's just a matter of keeping on it. The best place to start is with old Dogger." His teeth flashed as his smile turned feral. "And getting my hands on him will be a pure pleasure."

She shook her head in wonderment. "If you only could. You would be saving dozens—hundreds—of young women from horrors you can't imagine."

"Trust me." His mouth was only inches from hers. Somehow without her being aware, he had moved closer until their bodies were almost touching. She could see the pale freckles across the bridge of the long nose, the blue veins tracing the eyelids beneath the dark red brows.

Slowly, slowly, as if he feared to startle her, he slanted his face and brought their lips together.

She could feel herself melting as he put his arms around her and lifted her to his body.

Chapter Eleven

A Gentleman with a Lady

He was the only person who had ever caressed her. Nowhere among her earliest memories was there one of being held or petted. The only other person who had ever kissed her or whom she had kissed was Pansy Bowyer.

Rowdy MacPherson's kiss was more than a kiss. It was a seduction of her senses. His soft, full lips moved on hers, touching, sampling, sliding sideways to nibble at the corner of her mouth. He put his big hands on either side of her face and guided it gently aslant his own. Where his big hands held her, warmth bloomed and left all the bare skin around cold by comparison.

She gasped at the sensation, too powerful to be borne and remain still. Exquisite, sharp pains ran along her arms and legs. At the bottom of her belly, a deep curling fire began.

He had promised her this sensation. She was honest enough with herself to recognize that she had lived on each kiss he had given her until the next time. His kiss was what she had waited for. And now his kiss was not enough. So many times during the night and morning, she could have left his side, should have left. But she had not wanted to leave him.

She could have put him alone into the cab. She could have

brought him to the door of the hotel and left him. She could have put him in his room and left him. She could have—

Instead, she answered his kiss, imitating his movement with little nibbles of her own. Instead of pushing away from him, she hugged him closer, letting her arms draw her breasts up high and tight against him, swaying forward until her belly rested between his hipbones.

He groaned. She stretched up on her toes expecting, willing what happened next. He straightened his back, lifting her with him, so her toes reached for the carpet a foot beneath them. He had kissed her just this way in the alley. She remembered the exquisite excitement of it.

Still kissing her, his tongue teasing, begging her to open to him, he swayed back on his heels. Now she lay against him, warm, yielding, soft, so small. Beneath the layers of shapeless clothing she was a woman prepared to admit that she longed for a man.

Her chest heaved as she fought for breath. "Rowdy."

Under his hands and mouth, she opened to him, spread herself, pushed toward him, heated. He thrust his tongue into the sweet breath that pronounced his name. Her next words were muffled, or were they words at all? They might have been merely sweet moans of pleasure. His mind whirled. Where was the bed? All he wanted was to put this creature down on it and love her.

Her body. He wanted to see her body and to be inside it. Their mouths still sealed, he blundered across the room, brushing her chair aside in his journey, finding the bed by sheer blind luck, falling upon it.

His own lungs were laboring. He had to raise his head away from her sweet mouth to breathe.

Her face was white with high points of color on her cheekbones. Those wonderful aristocratic cheekbones with the delicate hollows beneath them. Her eyelashes lay black against the textured satin. Then they swept up.

And he sank into the rich velvet of her eyes. Dark, dark brown. Brown as chocolate. Brown as old richly polished leather. Brown as hand-rubbed walnut. And around each pupil

was a darker ring, almost black. He shook his head. He had never seen their like.

"Duchess. You are the prettiest little thing . . ." The words were banal, but the sincerity was undeniable. His deep voice played like tiny shocks of static electricity along her nerves, already stretched taut with desire.

She caressed his cheek and lifted her head to kiss his lips. In the hall at Audley, he had offered her the chance to touch him. Now, she took it rapturously.

He smiled in anticipation. His heart stepped up its eager beating. She was as eager for this as he. She wanted him.

"Duchess," he whispered as he moved above her. "Duchess," he repeated as he sank his tongue into her mouth. His left elbow supported his body. One arm slid over her torso and his hand lifted her buttock.

She arched her throat and moaned. An open invitation to she knew not what.

But he knew. His tongue trailed down the long column, touching the beating pulse, testing her arousal. "You want me," he whispered. "You want me."

She gasped and twisted restlessly, afraid to answer, suddenly shy about opening her desires to him. He had to bend to hear her say. "I want you."

His mouth touched the hollow at the base of her throat, sucking gently, laving it with his tongue. His hand pulled aside the delapidated gray coverings. Beneath them she was white. So white.

He could not stop. His fingers flew as he bared one perfect breast. White with a dusty rose tip. He closed his eyes. Reverently, he slid his lips over it.

He felt her flesh quake. Felt her body shiver and then stiffen. "Duchess?" He raised his head again. Her eyes were closed. Tears sparkled on her eyelashes.

The tears were like an icy shower. "What's wrong?"

She opened her eyes immediately. "Nothing."

He put his forehead on the bed beside her cheek. "Something's wrong. You're crying." His own body was throbbing. His thighs aching with wanting her. "Tell me."

"I'm not crying. It's so beautiful." Her voice quavered. "It's just that it's all so new. I don't—"

"Oh." He pulled his hand off her breast. "Are you a virgin?"

She hated to tell him. She was neither innocent nor ignorant. She was simply untouched. How ironic! She had prided herself on her virginity, her singularity. Now she regretted it! She wanted to make love to him as if they were two adults seeking pleasure. He was so very, very big, but she was certain he was gentle, and so strong. He would never hurt her.

He raised his head to look at her. "Are you?"

She turned her face away. A coldness akin to his enwrapped her. To give herself to a man without benefit of marriage was wrong. Men did not respect women who did. They treated them with careless cruelty. Her whole career as a rescuer was based on that single premise. She was saving young women from men's careless cruelty.

An abyss yawned before her. She did not want that for herself.

He had pushed up, until his arms were at full stretch above her. His voice carried a hint of accusation. "You are."

She trembled. "Yes."

He closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. And then another that was a groan. She was a virgin and he was a gentleman. Years of teachings from his father and his mother, from his whole world, formed a barricade through which he could not pass. A gentleman did not take advantage of a lady. Particularly one so young. She didn't know what she was doing. She was his responsibility. He collapsed over onto his back away from her and flung a long arm over his eyes. "It's not right. And I'd hate myself when it was over."

She sat up over him. "Oh, don't. Oh, please, don't hate yourself."

He chuckled. "I'll get over it."

She slumped back so they lay side by side. Gradually, their blood ceased to pound through their veins. Their breathing evened. The pain subsided for both of them.

Drowsily, she found his hand and slipped her own into it.

"I don't see why you didn't go ahead. All the men I've ever known would not have stopped."

He dropped his arm away from his side. "I don't know how I did."

"But why?"

He scarcely had to think about his answer. "Because you were afraid. You wanted me to love you, but you didn't know what that was going to be like. The body's a powerful thing. Mighty powerful. It can trick you. You didn't know what you wanted. And I'm no cad. My papa raised me to be a gentleman."

"I suppose every virgin is afraid. Lots of girls are afraid when they know what they want."

Gingerly, he turned on his side to study her, resting his head in the crook of his arm. Now that the passion was over, his own body was cooling his heat with painful reminders that he had a scratch down the center of his body and a puncture wound in his belly. So far, nothing had soaked through the bandages, but not because he had taken special care. "That's just not so," he contradicted. "At least not the women I know in Texas."

"And have you known so many?" Part of her wanted to get up and leave. Another part wanted to stay beside him forever.

He raised one dark red eyebrow. "About my share, I reckon. But I never asked a girl to do it with me. It wouldn't be right until after we were married. Then they won't and shouldn't be afraid. And I do know something about the women in my family. I don't think they were ever afraid."

"How wonderful for them," she said, and meant every word. She could not doubt his sincerity and his truthfulness. Texas must be a wonderful place if the women were not afraid.

"Yes." He reached out to touch her cheek. His blue eyes studied her as if he were trying to memorize her. Then he closed his eyes and dropped over onto his back. At that moment he wanted to stretch out on the bed and let sleep overcome him. He hurt now. And he was really going to hurt when he awoke.

"How will I find you?" he protested as she put her battered hat back on her head and wrapped her scarf around it.

"You don't need to find me." She turned her back to him. She really did not want to look at him. The sight of him might weaken her resolve. She needed to get as far away from Rowdy MacPherson as possible. He was from another world, and he would return to it soon. She was already afraid that she would miss him too much. "I can't help you. You don't need to be helping me. You have to help your friend. Go to the American consul."

"Wait." Rowdy thrust his legs over the side of the bed. The sheet fell away. He was bare below the hem of his shirt, which reached only to the tops of his muscular thighs.

Her eyes widened at the sight of him as he stood. Never had she imagined legs so long, nor so breathtaking. Each vein left a blue tracery, each muscle was a separate cord under the skin. And each dark red hair stood out against it. Her mouth was dry. "No. You're much better if you can stand up like that."

She closed her eyes in horror as his manhood poked against the tail of the shirt. She spun around. "Oh, God."

"I'm sorry. Excuse me." He fumbled at his clothing.

She threw herself at the door. "Goodbye."

"Wait! How will I find you?" he repeated. "What's your address?"

"I don't have one."

"I don't supposed your last name's really Smythe."

Opening the door, she flashed him a sad, sweet smile. "Not really."

"Would you be the lady what lives over there in that house?" A broad-shouldered man approached Duchess. His nose looked as if it have been broken at least twice. His jaw was misshapen, and the hand extended toward her had knobby knuckles.

She recognized his livery. And she thought she recognized him. Still she hesitated.

He looked around him. Seeing no one else, he pulled a paper

from his breast pocket and offered it to her. "I be thinking you are."

It was a thick white paper folded twice and sealed with wax. On the outside, spidery black handwriting addressed it simply to "Montague."

"Yes." Duchess reached into her pocket for a coin, but the man backed away.

"I been paid."

Inside her flat she laid it on the hall table. As she undressed, it lay there like a snake, like a vial of poison, like a scorpion. Pansy was in school, Mrs. Nance out. The rooms were so quiet that the sound of the steaming water running into the tub was like a waterfall. She added salts and sank into its depths to let it soothe her. She leaned her head back against the tub but she could not relax. *What is it? Why?*

Uttering a thoroughly foul word, she climbed out. Stark naked, dripping water, she stalked through the rooms. Drops splattered on the name but did it no damage. Once the name had been written in India ink, the paper would crumble first. Taking a deep breath, she ripped it open.

The message was stark.

"Montague has taken a turn for the worse."

It bore no signature. But she knew its author.

Water still dripped from her body onto the small Oriental carpet. She swallowed hard. She should rip it across. She should burn it in the fireplace. She should toss it out the window and let it blow far, far away.

She shivered. Folding it carefully, she laid it down on the table and hurried back to the warm bathroom.

"Duchess." Pan's feet thudded down the hall. "Duchess!"

She moaned, then tried to open her eyes.

"Now she may be asleep, Pan. Don't you be disturbing her." Mrs. Nance's gentle voice rolled down the hall after her charge.

"Duchess," Pan whispered noisily as she opened the bedroom door a crack. "Are you asleep?"

"Yes."

Ignoring the answer to her own question, the little girl bounced into the room and threw herself onto the bed. "I'm so glad you're back. You must have rescued ever so many girls. You weren't even home when I went to school this morning."

"Umph." Duchess tried to burrow her head under the pillow.

"She's awake," Pan caroled to Mrs. Nance. "I had a lovely day at school. We looked at a map of England and saw where London is and then we wrote it on our slates. Miss Stokes said mine was the best except my L was backwards. And then we painted with water colors and I didn't get any on me and then we ate a lovely lunch and—"

"Come out of there, Pan," Mrs. Nance called from the door. "Duchess is trying to get some sleep."

"That's all right, Mrs. Nance." Duchess rolled over with a sigh and propped a pillow under her head. "That sounds wonderful, Pansy."

"It was. School is lovely." Pan plumped up another pillow and put it behind her head. Heedless of her shoes on the counterpane, she settled down beside her idol. "Who did you rescue last night?"

"Shall I bring tea, mum?"

"Thank you," Duchess nodded.

"Yes, that would be lovely," Pan agreed. "Were Bert and Peter with you?"

"At first. Then I was alone." Duchess hesitated, trying to decide whether or not to tell Pan what had happened.

"Alone! Oh, Duchess, you shouldn't ever go alone. Why didn't you come home and get me? I would have—"

"Pansy, listen to me. I didn't find any girls to rescue." Duchess took the little girl's hand. "I happened to rescue a young man who had been hurt. I wasn't in any danger."

"Oh."

Duchess steeled herself for the next question.

"Who?"

"The one whose pocket you picked the other night."

Pan sprang upright and twisted around on her knees. Her curls bounced on her shoulders. "The one who talks so funny?"

"Yes."

"The tall man."

"Yes."

Her little mouth spread in grin. "The one who kissed you."

Duchess could feel the color rising in her cheeks. Her voice was almost a whisper when she said, "Yes."

"Did he kiss you again? For rescuing him?"

"Well, yes." Duchess's blush turned fiery as she remembered the ecstatic minutes in Rowdy MacPherson's arms.

"Oh, how lovely!" Pan sprang off the bed and danced around the room clapping her hands. "That's the loveliest thing. Oh, I'm going to have a father. A father. A father."

Mrs. Nance appeared in the doorway with the tray in time to hear the crooning.

"Pansy," Duchess protested. "Pansy, that's not true." She exchanged a helpless glance with her housekeeper. "This whole thing was an accident. He's an American. A Texan. For heaven's sake! He'll only be here in London until his business is finished. Then he'll sail for home."

Pan twirled in a circle, forcing Mrs. Nance to step aside as she crossed to set the tray on the bed. "He's so tall. And handsome. And he kissed her the very first time they met. He knocked her hat off and saw how lovely her hair was. He fell in love right then and there."

"My, isn't that romantic!"

"Mrs. Nance," Duchess protested. "Don't encourage her in these ridiculous fancies."

Pan clasped her hands under her chin and rolled her eyes. "It's so lovely. We're going to get married in the big church. I'll get to be a flower girl again. This time I'll wear a blue dress because my eyes are blue." She flew to the mirror to ogle herself. After assuring herself that her eyes were indeed blue, she whirled away and twirled around, until her skirts flared out knee high. "And he'll be my father. My father."

Duchess hid her eyes behind her hand.

Mrs. Nance caught the child by the skirt and pulled her to her side. "That all sounds wonderful, Pan, my girl, but don't you think Duchess should be the one having something to say about all this?"

"What? What should she say? She'll have a husband and he'll—"

"Shush, shush. What a little planner you are!" She bent over and whispered in Pan's ear loudly enough for Duchess to overhear. "But you can't make these things happen. If they're truly in love, then he'll come courting like a proper gentleman. Then she'll have time to make up her mind the way a proper lady should. And then you can plan."

"But—"

Mrs. Nance straightened up and pushed Pan toward the bed. Over the bright blond curls, she gave Duchess a knowing look. "Now, no more of your dancing and spinning around. You'll make yourself dizzy and sick. And you won't be able to drink this nice tea. Come and sit down."

Pan obeyed. Her stomach rumbled in expectation as she allowed Mrs. Nance to lift her onto the bed and arrange a napkin across her lap. Duchess passed her a plate with a cup of tea and several biscuits.

"Will that be all, ma'am?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Nance. We'll be fine now."

As the door closed behind her, Pan swallowed the first biscuit in one bite and daintily used her napkin to brush imaginary crumbs from her mouth. Before she took a bite out of the second, she made a pronouncement. "Tomorrow I'm going to ask my teacher to show me Texas on the map."

"Ah, Duchess. I wondered if you'd come."

"Hello, Cate."

The woman called Cate put her legs over the side of the wine red chaise longue and rose lithely. Black taffeta skirts rustling, she strolled toward her visitor. With each step, the skirts parted, exposing long white legs in high-heeled half boots. Her crimped black hair lay like fishhooks on the forehead, temples, and cheeks of her stark white face. Her mouth was painted a vibrant scarlet.

From a decanter on the side table she poured a couple of

inches of brown liquid into two glasses and passed one to Duchess. "Here's to the old bastard."

She tilted back her head and tossed half the liquor down her throat. The movement exposed the bones of her neck and the shadowed hollows at its base. Beneath the dressing gown, her bosom was flat as a boy's. The fiery swallow made no impression on her. She smiled as her visitor took a tentative sip.

Duchess smothered a gasp with a cough. As she waited for her throat to return to normal after the powerful brandy, she looked around the room.

All light seemed concentrated in the fire blazing in the hearth. The gaslight sconces on either side of the door were turned so low that they did little more than cast shadows. The walls were paneled in mahogany, the Turkey carpet was dark red. Furniture consisted of a double bed, heavily draped in scarlet and gold, a desk and chair in the far corner beyond the bed, the small side table for the brandy and tobacco, and the lounge before the fire.

Cate stalked across the room to the fire. Her hair was cut short in back just as it was in front, and crimped into tight ringlets. Again Duchess was reminded of a young boy. Silhouetted by the fire, Cate pulled a flat silver box from her skirt pocket. Opening it, she withdrew a cigarette. Careless that the dress fell open, revealing her meager breasts, she stooped and held a long match in the flickering flames.

As she lighted the cigarette, she looked at Duchess through narrow eyes. "Aren't you curious?"

Duchess hesitated. "I wouldn't have come if I hadn't been. Your note said a turn for the worse?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

Duchess's eyes widened. Her first thought was that perhaps Clarice would not have to lie after all. "Have you sent a message to Lady Montague?"

Cate dropped the match into the fire and blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "Why would she care?"

Duchess blinked. Cate's voice had grated like a file over stone. "She's his wife."

"And such a loving one," Cate commented sarcastically. Like

a panther she began a slouch-hipped pacing back and forth across the room. Taffeta swished. Cigarette smoke trailed behind her. "A quick visit once a month in a closed carriage. Herself covered from head to toe in veils."

"What would you expect?" Duchess chided. "That she'd bring her friends with her to a whorehouse?"

Cate feigned an expression of shock. "Such words. Please, this is a high-class brothel." She spun away on her heel. "I'll wager she hasn't missed him once since she left him here."

"You're still getting the money to take care of him," Duchess reminded her.

Cate flashed her a suspicious look before she dropped the ash off the end of her cigarette into the fire. "Oh, yes. I get a fat check every month. From her solicitor Bartholomew—er—Bartholomew somebody. Isn't that a laugh? Bartholomew—er—Falmouth. He even paid me a visit one day. 'To see that I had everything I needed,' he said. To check up on me, I guessed."

Duchess smiled at the name, but not for the same reason that Cate did. She took another sip of brandy. "You're wrong about Lady Montague, you know. She does care."

The other woman merely sniffed. She stalked back across the room to the sidetable, where she sloshed more liquor into the glass. Antipathy fairly radiated from her at the mention of Montague's second wife. "Friggin' ladyships don't care about the bloody lordships they have to marry."

Duchess stirred restively, unaffected by the foul language. "Perhaps not." She leaned forward. "Have you ever considered that they might care about the ones who have to take care of the bloody lordships?"

Cate whirled around and gaped at her words. Then she let loose a shriek of laughter. "You're crazy."

Duchess shrugged. "Is there something you want me to do?"

"Is there something you want me to do!" Cate rasped in a singsong rhythm. Her red lips peeled back, exposing her teeth in a mocking grin. "No! Yes!" She hesitated. "I thought you might like to see him—and he to see you."

"Is Lady H here?"

"Her? No. She can't stand the sight of him."

Duchess set the brandy glass down half full and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. Her stomach began to quiver. "Why would you think I would want to see him?"

Cate smiled like a cat with feathers on the side of her mouth. "You're his daughter. Too," she added slyly. "I thought you might like a spot of your own back."

"Is that what this is about? Revenge?" Duchess pushed herself out of the chair. She could feel irritation sparkling in her. She had made the special effort to come here when she had vowed never to set foot in the place again. How could she have been such a fool? She might have known the taller woman had served her own purpose. "I came because I thought you needed me. You. And you only. But you don't need me."

"Oh, I could use you." Cate laughed her raspy laugh. Her voice was silky with sexual innuendo. "But you wouldn't want to help me in that way. No. I have a message for you—"

Duchess reached the door.

"—from *Monro Taine*."

Duchess froze, her mouth dry. Who or what waited outside the door for her? Had she escaped one trap to walk into another? Her scalp prickled and her heartbeat accelerated.

Behind her she could hear the rustle of Cate's clothing, the soft thud of her heels as she stalked across the floor and stretched out on the chaise that creaked faintly. "Why don't you come back and sit down?" she called. "I'll tell you what I heard. And then we'll go and see Montague. I'd like to see if he still has enough sense to recognize you."

As Duchess slowly returned to her chair, Cate fussed with arranging her clothing so that her naked legs were exposed to mid-thigh. She crossed her ankles and tapped the cigarette ash into a smoking stand.

Duchess took a steadying drink of the brandy. "Will I be allowed to leave then?"

Cate's eyes flashed up. She rendered her version of an angelic smile. "You think I'd deliver you to that? Why, Duchess, I'm shocked—and wounded to the quick. After all we've been to each other."

"We were never anything to each other," came the dry response.

Cate studied her scarlet-tipped nails. Each was a tiny dagger sharpened to draw blood. "Perhaps not. Perhaps so. But you know what Mr. Kipling says about the Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady?"

Duchess shook her head.

"They're sisters under the skin."

Identical pairs of brown eyes so dark they were almost black met and held. Neither girl looked away. Duchess grimaced as she finished the brandy and set it down with a little more force than necessary. "Say what you have to say."

All expression disappeared from Cate's face. "To warn you, even though you don't believe me." Cate lighted another cigarette. She draped one bare arm over the back of the chaise. "The word's out, Duchess. You're marked. And no one can stop what's going to happen to you—and those brats you've collected—"

"They're all safe in good homes," Duchess interrupted.

"All?"

"All except one."

"Get rid of her fast. In fact, find a place to hide her and hide yourself. The little man has his little temper up. Since he can't get much else up"—she chuckled—"of course, he has to act on the little bit that he has. So here's my advice, lovey. And it's all free. Whether you want it or not. Take the brat and take the train."

Duchess rose from her chair. Hands extended in front of her, she crossed to the fire. "I can't just run away. There's so much to do. So many helpless girls. Oh, I know I can't save them all. But in my head I have this picture of everyone I save, screaming for help right up until the second she hears my voice. And then she has hope. She knows she's going to be all right."

"You're crazy," Cate sneered, but softly.

Duchess turned again to meet her eyes. "Do you remember the day you told me who and what I was?"

Cate tipped back her head and blew a perfect smoke ring into the air. Shaping her mouth into an angelic smile, she

dropped her head. The ring hung above her like a halo. "Happy birthday."

"That's right. Happy fifteenth birthday." Duchess came toward her. "You did me a favor that day."

"I know. Truth hurts, but it's the best thing in the end." Cate's smile became a leer. The smoke ring disappeared into the swathes of smoke layering the room.

"Suddenly, I understood everything. Everything."

"Lucky for you, you left that day. Lady H had an offer for you, she wasn't going to refuse." Cate stubbed out the cigarette. "Much more than she got for me at twelve."

"I've dedicated my life to saving girls, just as you saved me."

Cate rose hastily. "Go easy there. I'm not a bloody saint. Don't you ever believe it. I wanted you gone. And the next day you were." She faced her sister squarely. "Now it's time to go again. And tomorrow."

Duchess sighed as she lowered herself into her chair. "Where should I go?"

"What difference does it make?" Cate nonchalantly blew her smoke across the room at Duchess. "It's too hot in London for you. Take the brat and go to Scotland, to Lady Clarice in the country, to Ireland, to France. You've got the world to choose from. Hell, get married if you want to."

The room seemed silent after the ringing words.

Duchess sighed. "Thank you, Cate."

"Don't thank me." She pivoted on her heel. Her taffeta skirts flared out and then wrapped around her legs. "Just come with me now. I really think Montague's about to cash in his chips; I thought he might enjoy the sight of you. I want him to see you. Bring your glass." Stopping by the liquor cabinet she poured herself another drink, one for Duchess, and a third into an empty glass. "For dear Montague." She laughed eerily.

Reluctantly, Duchess followed the rustling black taffeta and the clicking heels around a corner and down another long hall. Still suspicious, she walked as silently as possible, reluctant to disturb whatever was going on behind the doors on either side. Again she castigated herself for coming in the first place. Cate's

warning was unnecessary. Dogger had already given her the word with great force. Furthermore, when she received the message and thanked Cate for it, why had she not left immediately? While she could barely tolerate her half-sister, she most definitely did not want to see the man whose seed had begun her life.

She walked so slowly that she still had half the hall to traverse when Cate arrived at the door at its end. "Come on."

"I don't know why you want him to see me," Duchess hissed. "I only saw him once in my life."

"But he thought he recognized you."

"He was drunk." Duchess shuddered at the memory.

"Hold this." Cate shoved Montague's drink into the other woman's hand and unlocked the door. As it swung open, she stepped aside and executed a bow. "After you, milady."

Duchess stepped into darkness and heat which struck her in the face. She heard Cate step in and close the door behind them. "Just a minute," Cate said. Then, "Damn."

Then gas hissed and popped in a burst of flame. She turned to see Cate had lighted it by holding the tip of her cigarette near the jet.

"That's dangerous," Duchess observed. "You could lose your eyebrows."

"Not if you know how," Cate boasted. "Here he is."

At first, Duchess could not find the man named Montague. The room was furnished with all manner of strange things. An old-fashioned copper bathtub was set by a hissing, gurgling radiator that made the room oppressively warm. A Bath chair stood before the window, a rug draped over the back of it. A small table stood beside it with a carafe and a couple of glasses on a tray. The carafe was half full of a brown liquid Duchess guessed to be brandy. Through an open wardrobe door, Duchess could see several men's garments hanging.

"Come closer," Cate urged. "He's in bed for the evening."

The sooner he could see her, the better, she told herself. She moved to the side of the bed.

A pathetic figure lay on his back, partially concealed from the casual observer by a feather mattress rising up on either

side of him. The body was covered to within a few inches of the chin by a sheet and blanket. The head was propped on the pillow.

The man lay so still that Duchess could detect no breathing at first. She looked uncertainly over her shoulder.

Cate walked past her and circled the bed. She motioned with her cigarette. "Closer. Don't be afraid. He can't hurt you. He's alive. Come closer."

"I don't think I should."

The eyelashes flickered in the pale raddled face. Slowly, slowly, the eyelids rose. Whatever she had expected to see, Duchess knew the expression she saw was not this.

Savagery!

The ferocity of a beast, of a creature so furious that his anger boiled out of the volcanic black eyes. Then the mouth dropped open and a hideous braying sound issued forth.

Duchess fell back across the room. The glasses slipped from her hands, shattered in the floor. Brandy splattered her skirt.

And Cate laughed uproariously. "Scared you, didn't he? I've got to admit he startles me too sometimes."

Duchess backed toward the door, followed by the braying sound.

"Don't go," Cate called. "He'll calm down in a minute." She slapped the pillow beside the still head. The furious eyes moved toward her. "Stop that, Montague. I've brought a visitor to see you and you've frightened her half out of her wits."

The eyes looked at Cate with obdurate hatred, then flicked to Duchess. The bray changed to a moan. The eyes seemed to plead.

"Come on." Cate motioned to the other girl. "See. He's calm now." She slipped her hand under the man's head and placed her own brandy glass against his lips. "A little drink," she crooned. "Just the thing to settle the nerves."

Some of the brandy went into the man's mouth, the rest of it trickled down his chin. He seemed to choke. She eased his head back and toasted him with the glass. Then she pointed to Duchess. "Do you recognize her? She's your daughter."

Montague looked at his visitor. A tiny movement of muscle

in his throat. His lips moved. Something between a grunt and a squawk issued from them.

Cate shrugged. "Doesn't sound like any word I ever heard."

She came around the foot of the bed and strolled to the window. "We get him up and put him in his chair every day." She turned it around to face the room. "It's the very best, made by the company that builds the ones in Bath. I had it brought to London by special freight. We put him in front of the window, so he can look out. Don't we, Montague?"

Curious despite her fear, Duchess moved closer to the bed. "What does the doctor say?"

"That he'll never be any better. It's just a matter of time." She looked from Montague to Duchess. "I think he knows you. That's something. I was afraid his wits were gone."

The man on the bed produced several unintelligible sounds. His eyes blinked rapidly.

Duchess felt a surge of pity. "Do you suppose he's trying to say something?"

Cate frowned. She tossed off her drink and adjusted the cover over the paralyzed man's chest. "I used to think so, but I don't think so anymore. There's no consistency to what he says."

The volcanic eyes flashed to her face, damning her. The slobbering mouth brayed.

"Now don't be upset," Cate said in a gentle voice. "We'll go away and leave you to your sleep."

She took Duchess by the arm. "Thank you for coming," she said, guiding her out and closing the door. "I think he did know you."

The awful braying was cut off the instant the door closed. "It's double thickness," she said in answer to Duchess's unspoken question. "I had it fixed so nothing could disturb him."

As they walked down the hall together, Duchess felt sickness rising in her throat. She swallowed convulsively. "I must leave. I don't know what to say about . . ." She waved her hand back down the hall toward the sickroom. "You've obviously taken good care of him. The chair, the bath, everything."

Cate smiled. "I have, haven't I?"

They came to the grand staircase that led down into the

salons below. "And thank you for warning me. I'll think about what you've said."

Cate polished off the brandy and stubbed her cigarette out in the bottom of the glass. "Be sure to think about what you've seen. He was Lord Terence Montague, Member of Parliament, Knight of the Garter. He still is, I suppose, but he's not at his fancy town house or his country estate. He's in a brothel being taken care of by whores. Isn't that rich? Isn't it sweet? How the mighty have fallen!"

Duchess shook her head. "I don't think so. I don't think anyone deserves that kind of suffering."

Cate shrugged. "His power and wealth didn't do him much good, did it? Goodness is even more useless. No matter how much good you try to do, it won't save you when someone really wants to hurt you. Think what could happen to you if Monro Taine gets his hands on you."

The brothel-keeper's philosophy made Duchess shudder. "I must go. Goodbye."

Laughing silently, Cate watched her till she was out of sight.

Chapter Twelve

A Texan in London

Clarence DeCamp stared at his hands. They were trembling so badly that he could not have turned a card from a deck to save his life. He reached out blindly and wrapped one around the glass of brown liquid. Without flinching he tossed it down.

"A thousand pounds." He shuddered.

Cheviot regarded the gambler from under veiled eyelids. "You'll get it," he said coldly. "A few more days and MacPherson will give in. He cares about his cousin very much. Jail is a very unpleasant place for anyone. I suspect for anyone used to the wide-open spaces, it must be sheer hell."

DeCamp shook his head. He stiffened his spine and glared at the viscount. "You'd better be certain. Taine won't wait. A telegram to 'the old pater' will get me what I want."

Cheviot's eyes were chips of blue ice. "But then it'll all be over, won't it, Clarence? The end, so to speak."

The gambler shrugged his shoulders. "At least, I'll be alive."

"Unless Lord Cheviot is willing to drop the charges, Mr. Sandoval has to be detained," Revill said regretfully.

"Detective Inspector." Daniel Sawyer, the American consul, used the full title. "Surely in the case of young man of good

family, the Empire's guest so to speak, there's no need for him to remain in prison. His own recognizance is sufficient."

"I don't know about his being from a good family. We've only got his word for that." Revill took that moment to look Rowdy up and down. "And yours."

"Gill's my cousin."

Sawyer laid a restraining hand on Rowdy's arm. "The very fact that the young men were at Audley by invitation testifies to their status. They came on business. That they mixed in a little pleasure, some boyish hijinks, is surely not to their detraction."

Revill was ready with the next question. "What's to keep Mr. Sandoval from leaving the country? A train ticket to Portsmouth and he'd be gone."

Rowdy came out of his chair in a single movement. "Gill'd never jump bail. He'll be around to straighten this mess out. You can count on him. This whole thing is a lie anyway."

His expression revealing his impatience, the inspector looked up at the tall Texan. "So you've told me, but the fact remains—"

Sawyer motioned Rowdy back to his seat. "Detective Inspector, you've already told these young men that you consider this a boyish prank. If the case is brought to trial—by your own admission, unlikely—and Guillermo Sandoval is found guilty—again unlikely—what can be the possible result? A fine of a few pounds."

"Right," Rowdy seconded eagerly. "It's costing you more than that to feed him every day. You're stirring up a cyclone for nothing."

"Mr. MacPherson. Please calm yourself." Sawyer threw him a quelling look before he turned back to the inspector. "The fact is that Mr. MacPherson and Mr. Sandoval were sent here on a trade mission from the Farm and Ranch Association in San Antonio, Texas. Their purchase of Hereford cattle, a breed for which England is justly famous, is of vital importance to the breeders there. They need to be about their business"—he raised his voice when Revill looked as though he might raise a further argument—"which is the business of trade and com-

merce, a vital part of England's economy and Her Majesty's comfort and pleasure."

"Right. Queen Victoria." Grinning, Rowdy pointed to the lady's portrait above Revill's desk.

Revill flicked a tolerant glance at the young man. However, he studied the consul thoughtfully. Everything the man said was true. The arrest of Guillermo Sandoval had taken up entirely too much time and effort to no purpose. The real reason for the warrant was probably petty revenge for an imagined slight. It might even have been sworn out as a joke. Such doings were not unheard of among the fast Marlborough House set that surrounded the Prince of Wales.

Not for the first time, the detective inspector longed for a job where so much pressure was not placed on him from outside forces. He lifted his shoulders in a tired shrug. "I'm sure but—"

"I need my cousin to help me," Rowdy broke in. Using his most earnest expression, he lied without compunction. "He's the one who knows all about Hereford cattle. I just came along for the ride."

"Exactly. The man is essential to the mission." Sawyer opened a briefcase and took out some papers. "With your signature I'll expedite the whole process. These young men can get on about their business. When the unfortunate matter of the charges shall be brought to court or dismissed as the case may be, directly thereafter they can return to their country with their cattle."

With a sigh Revill capitulated. "Pass 'em over."

The inspector read the documents carefully. When his pen scratched across the paper, Rowdy had to tamp down the urge to let loose with a loud rebel yell. Gill was going to be free. He sprang to his feet. "Can I go get him right now?"

"No." The other men spoke in unison.

Rowdy subsided like a disappointed schoolboy.

"These papers have to be guided through proper channels." Sawyer slipped them into his briefcase. "I'll be about that now, Mr. MacPherson. Detective Inspector Revill, thank you very much."

"You're welcome."

Sawyer gathered his things together and started for the door. "MacPherson."

Rowdy frowned. "You go on. I've got something I'd like to talk to the inspector about."

Both men looked at him in surprise.

"We've taken up quite enough of the inspector's time," Sawyer suggested.

"This won't take long." Rowdy stood his ground. "You go on. I've got to visit Gill and tell him the good news."

Sawyer shrugged. "Good day, to you both."

Rowdy returned to his chair. Revill steepled his fingers in front of his mouth and waited.

"The Duchess sure knew how things worked." Rowdy threw the sentence into the silence.

Revill's eyes narrowed. "Which duchess?"

"Not a real duchess. Leastways, I don't think she's real. She says the name's a joke. But she talks like a duchess. Real highfalutin' lingo. She walks around the streets at night. With a little girl."

"Oh, Duchess." Revill's voice did not register any enthusiasm. "How'd you meet her?"

Rowdy hesitated. This man knew her, but how much did he know? How much should he ask? For that matter how much should he tell? Certainly not that her companion had picked his pocket. Not that she was a rescuer. He certainly did not want Revill to know about the attack. He finally settled on something innocent. "She did me a favor," he said finally. "I wanted her address so I could pay her back."

Revill's expression blackened. "If she'd wanted you to find her, she would have given you her address. Since she didn't, you leave her alone."

Rowdy blinked. "Hey. You've got the wrong idea. I'm not going to hurt her."

The inspector rose and came round the desk. Though he barely reached Rowdy's chin, his shoulders were broad and his stockier body looked well able to hold his own. In fact, Rowdy's gangling length, his long arms, and longer legs in high-heeled

boots looked at a disadvantage. "Duchess doesn't need any trouble from you." Revill stabbed his finger into Rowdy's chest. "Understand me."

Rowdy gasped and backed away. "I don't want to make trouble for her. I just—"

Revill followed him. "Leave her alone."

"I just want to thank her." Rowdy put his hands up protectively. Beneath his vest, shirt, and undershirt, sweat broke out on his body, and a drop of blood beaded from the freshly scabbed wound beneath his clothing.

"Don't thank her. Don't go near her. Leave her alone!" Revill spat each word out in the manner that had intimidated malefactors for fifteen years.

Rowdy stumbled over his own feet. "Who is she?"

Revill reached past him and opened the door. "Goodbye, Mr. MacPherson. The quicker you get your business done and get out of London, the better."

Rowdy knotted the silk neckerchief around his throat and tucked his pants into his black Western boots with the fancy flame stitching. The sight of them made him homesick for the hot plains, the lazy blue-green San Antonio River, the cool shade of the big ranch living room. Outside his window a weak sun had long since given way to a nasty drizzle.

He straightened and reached for the gunbelt. At home he wore it only on roundups where sidewinders might strike when a man was on his way back from the creek or when he reached down into the buffalo grass to pick up a barbed-wire gate. Now he buckled it on with an air of purpose. Just let Dogger or any of his rats come around him again. He'd let his .45 do the arguing for him.

The big yellow slicker came next. He had almost left it out in his packing. Now he was mighty glad he had it. It would keep his clothes dry and hide his Colt at the same time.

Lifting first one foot and then the other to the lid of his trunk, he buckled on a pair of silver spurs. Reminiscently, he spun

the rowel. Again the wave of nostalgia, but it was tempered by a grin.

Last, he reached for his hat. With unusual care he set it at just the right angle on his neatly combed red hair. He ran his hand along the curved brim of his gray Stetson.

If this didn't work, he might look a little foolish, but it seemed the best shot he had of finding Duchess. He was convinced that she was the solution to all his problems. And more than that, he wanted her. They had some unfinished business. Even though he had acted the gentleman, he was still determined to keep company with her. She wanted him. He thought she liked him. With the proper persuasion, she could make life very interesting for the rest of his stay.

He checked himself front and side in the mirror. He should attract plenty of attention. Lifting his hand-tooled Mexican saddle and bridle out of the shipping crate, he headed for the lobby.

His passage through that august room drew the stares of every occupant. The doorman gaped as he held the door wide for Rowdy to maneuver the bulky tack through.

"Here now. You can't do that," the man from the livery stable protested when the Texan tugged the cinch loose.

"Sure I can." Rowdy pulled the English pancake off and swung his saddle on. The hack stamped and sidled, but the Texan tightened the cinch and moved to its head. With practiced hands he removed the English bit from its mouth and slipped his own bridle over its head.

"I can't let you do that," the livery stable man was saying for the third or fourth time as Rowdy handed him the stable bridle and swung up into his saddle. It felt like a homecoming beneath him.

"Sure you can," Rowdy replied, testing the stirrups and settling himself in the seat. "You're saving wear and tear on your own gear."

"But—"

"Adios. I'll have him back before dark." He touched the brim of his hat and trotted off down the street.

* * *

The Texan in the yellow slicker and gray Stetson drew the eyes of everyone on the street. People leaned out of their carriages to follow his figure. Coachmen and footmen craned their necks to get a longer look. Rowdy's saddle horn thrust up in front of him, the hand-tooled leather skirt and fenders, and the tapaderos trailing half a foot beneath the stirrup all drew stares from other horsemen.

Even the dapple gray horse from the livery stable stepped a little higher. Whether the practiced hands on the reins gave the dapple gray confidence or the elegant rig and rider made it proud, the horse even pranced a bit at intersections where its rider paused to ponder which way to go.

In short order Rowdy arrived on the corner where Duchess had found him leaning against the streetlamp. He had walked bound and bleeding for at least a couple of miles trying to get into an area where he could trust someone to help him. He was assuming that she lived somewhere in that neighborhood although he could not be certain. He had first seen her behind a gambling hell in Soho.

In the daylight the corner looked innocent enough. He rode up and down the two streets that intersected. All the houses were tall and gray, with common sidewalls. Their front stoops rose directly from narrow walks. They had no flowers, no green grass, no yards or porches. Again he missed Texas with a terrible pang.

He returned to the corner and pulled the horse to a halt. A couple of plainly dressed women halted in midstride to stare up at him in wonder before hurrying on with shopping bags bulging. A dray heavily loaded with coal creaked past. Then a taggle of little boys strolled up to him.

"Ask 'im," one urged.

"Do it," said another. "I dare y'."

The tallest one swelled his chest and strutted forward to within a foot of Rowdy's boot. "What kind o' saddle is that?"

"It's a Mexican saddle," Rowdy replied.

"Never 'eard of it."

"I'm new in town, and I haven't ridden down this street until today," Rowdy agreed.

"What's that thing?" The boy pointed to the horn on which Rowdy rested his forearm.

"It's a horn." Before he could explain further, they all fell against each other laughing and punching.

"Toot! Toot!"

"Ta-ran-ta-ra!"

"Let's hear y' blow it."

Rowdy grinned amicably. "It's not for blowing. You're right about that. When I rope a cow, I wrap my rope around it, so she doesn't drag me off my horse."

One of the smallest grabbed the spokesman's jacket and pulled him down to whisper in his ear. Both boys then looked Rowdy over earnestly. "Are you a cowboy?"

"That's right."

"From Buffalo Bill's Wild West Circus?" They edged closer eagerly. The whisperer even went so far as to put out a finger and stroke the curve of the tapadero.

"No. Never met the man. But I've heard about him. Great show."

"The best." With his hand still on the stirrup leather, the youngest looked up into Rowdy's face. "They've got cowboys and cows and horses and Indians and a stagecoach. And they shoot at each other. And the Indians wear feathers. And Buffalo Bill rides a white horse." He looked at Rowdy's horse. "Your horse isn't white, but it's very nice."

Rowdy patted the hack's neck. "He's not my horse. I borrowed him. But he's given me a pretty good ride."

"M' paw's going to get me a horse someday," one bragged. Instantly, the others pounced on him.

"Oh, don't y' wish. Yer paw?"

"He's not neither. He's drunk as a brewer's fart every night, m' mum says."

"Yer lyin', Mikey." The braggart swung around fists clenched. "Take that back. Yer lyin'."

Mikey laughed uproariously and dashed away. The braggart flew after him, leaving only three.

Rowdy bent lower along the horn. "I'm looking for someone," he said softly. "I wonder if you might know where I could find her."

They looked at each other. The tallest shrugged and snuffled. He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his jacket. "Might. I know everybody on this street."

"She's a lady with a little girl about six or seven."

"I don't like girls . . ." The youngest continued to stroke the tapadero and the saddle leather behind Rowdy's boot. ". . . much."

"I'm looking for a little girl about your size." Rowdy frowned. There were no little girls in sight. Not that he expected that they would be out playing in these gray chill streets.

"What's 'er name?"

"The little girl's name is Pansy."

The little boy stopped stroking the saddle and stepped back. He glanced uneasily at the tallest, who frowned savagely.

Bull's-eye! Rowdy thought.

They looked around them uneasily. "Pansy's a good name fer a girl. Girls are all sissies."

"Her mother calls herself Duchess," Rowdy supplied.

"Duchess ain't—ow!"

The tallest boy kicked him in the ankle. "Duchess ain't a real name," he finished loudly. "That's what y' meant to say, wasn't it, Freddy? Duchess ain't a real name at all. Huh! A duchess wouldn't be living around here anyway. Mrs. Grubbs in that third house yonder works for an earl, but that ain't the same as a duchess."

Rowdy reached through the slit in the slicker to find his wallet. "I don't mean her any harm," he remarked as if speaking to the world in general. "In fact I want to pay her some money. She helped me the other day. Really went out of her way. I understand she rescues people."

"Oh, yes." Freddy's little face brightened. "She—ow! Quit that!" He punched at the leader, who had kned him in the back of the leg.

Rowdy pulled a fat roll of notes from his pocket and peeled off a fiver. "I was going to give her this plus four more."

"Five plus one—two—three—four." Freddy was counting on his fingers. He looked up at his friend. "That's an awful lot of money, Jock."

Jock closed his hand over Freddy's starfish fingers. "Come on," he said firmly. As he pulled the reluctant Freddy away, he called over his shoulder. "Thanks fer lettin' us pet yer horse, mister."

"My pleasure." Rowdy turned the animal and set it to walking along beside them. "If you should meet anyone named Pansy around here, be sure and tell her that Randolph MacPherson from Texas came calling."

Jock stumped along head down, while Freddy pushed at the older boy's hand and whispered to him.

"I think I'll just give my horse a rest," Rowdy said. "There's a bench down in the next block. I think I'll just sit there for a few minutes."

Jock glared at him. "Suit yerself. Ain't no skin off my nose if you want to sit around in the rain."

"Maybe Pansy might take pity on me and come and get me. I'd give her a pound for the boy who told her where I was." With those words Rowdy touched his spurs lightly to the horse's flanks and trotted off down the street.

The bench was stone, so cold it felt like ice through the many thicknesses of his slicker, his wool coat and his trousers. The gray sky sank lower and lower. The mist had turned to drizzle. A trickle of it had found its way down the back of his collar. He stood up, stretched, and gathered the reins to climb onto his horse and ride back to the hotel.

"Mr. MacPherson. Mr. MacPherson!"

Pansy Bowyer in a bright blue coat came barreling toward him, bonnet bobbing back on her shoulders, golden curls bouncing. Behind her at a slower pace came Freddy, his little face mirroring his uncertainty.

"You found us!" Pan shouted. She was running so fast she could not stop.

"Hi, little girl." The most natural thing in the world was to

sweep her up in his arms and let her momentum carry her above his head. She screamed in terror.

"Stop it! Let her go!" Freddy broke into a run and plowed head first into Rowdy's hip. "Stop it! You mustn't hurt her!"

"Hey!"

He brought Pan down in the crook of one arm and used the other to ward off her defender.

"Don't you hurt her," Freddy cried again.

"Stop it. It's okay," Rowdy assured him. "Tell him, Pan."

"Yes. Yes." Pan put her arms around Rowdy's neck and hugged him hard. "He's nice, Freddy. I got scared for a minute because he's so tall, you see. But now I'm fine. This is Rowdy. This is the man I told you about. He's going to marry Duchess and be my father."

Stunned speechless, Rowdy stumbled back and sat down on the bench. "Pan," he began.

"She's so nice," Pan explained. "And you're so nice. And I'm really good, most of the time. If you'll be my father, I will be perfect. That's what Teacher says I should try to be. Perfect."

Freddy looked them over. Pan had ended up sitting in Rowdy's lap, her arms around his neck, her temple pressed against his chin. "See, Freddy. Won't he be a perfect father?"

The conversation was making him very uncomfortable. Where on earth did the child get the idea that he was going to marry Duchess? Had Duchess talked about him? He frowned. Was he about to fall into a trap? "Er—Pan . . ."

"You're a lucky duck, Pan," Freddy agreed enviously. "He's a cowboy. Like Buffalo Bill."

"I know," she crooned.

"Pan," Rowdy interrupted the conversation. He would take the matter of matrimony up with his quarry when he found her. "I really came to see Duchess to talk to her about some . . ." He hesitated. "I want to thank her for what she did for me the other night. She rescued me."

Pan's eyes got big. "She's wonderful. She rescued me too. When I was just five."

"I want to thank her. And to—er—offer to help her if she needs help." He did not want to frighten the child, but the ease

with which he had been able to find Duchess made him all the more determined to rid her of the problem of Monro Taine, whether she was willing to help him or not. He set the child on her feet and stood.

Drawing out his wallet, he gave Freddy the promised pound note. "Thanks a lot, *muchacho*."

Freddy looked doubtful at the name. "You're welcome."

"It's all right, Freddy," Pan told him loftily. "My father uses a lot of funny words. But Teacher says we have to learn new words every day. What does *mu-mukacho* mean?"

"Boy. It means boy." Rowdy blinked and swallowed at the ease with which the child had adopted him. Suddenly, he was a father.

"See." Pan slipped her little hand into Rowdy's big one. "Thank you for finding him for me, Freddy. Come on, Rowdy. Mrs. Nance will fix us a lovely tea. Duchess will be ever so glad to see you."

"Can I lead your horse," Freddy asked.

"Say, that'd be great." Rowdy handed him the reins.

Pan stopped short, her lower lip pooching out. Then she grinned. "I'll let you do it this one time, Freddy," she said generously. "Because you asked first. But after today, I get to lead Rowdy's horse."

Rowdy grinned as he let the children lead him down the street. Duchess would be anything but glad. She would probably be furious, upset, distressed. She might even be frightened. But he would soothe her fears. They would help each other. As soon as they got this problem of "father" worked out.

For a couple of minutes, however, he enjoyed the fantasy of these two children, Freddy and Pan, as his children, him as their father returning from work, dismounting and walking with them, leading his horse. The picture was not altogether unpleasant.

He was a long way from getting hitched, but still he liked to think about it.

Chapter Thirteen

Reluctant Alliance

Duchess pulled the heavy draperies together with more than necessary force and pressed her burning face into the velvet folds. In some ways she could not have been more upset if Monro Taine himself had been coming to the front door. *How had he found her?*

She fled across the entry hall and up the narrow stairs as Pan burst through the front door. "Duchess! He's here. Rowdy's come. He's going to be my father."

"Oh, no." Halfway to the landing, she had to hold on to the banister to keep from falling. Her shaking legs let her down, so she sat clutching the oak baluster. Anger gave way to embarrassment. "Oh, no," she whispered again, eyes closed. "Oh, please, go away."

"Duchess!" Pan's excited voice cut like a knife.

Her eyes flew open.

Clad in the bulky yellow slicker and topped by the gray Stetson, his six-foot-six frame filled the doorway. Intent on stopping Pan, he did not see Duchess crouched there. As she watched, his long arm shot out and caught the tail of Pan's coat. "Whoa, honey." He pulled her back and hunkered down beside her. Duchess could not repress a shudder as his arm went around the little girl and held her against him.

"Maybe it'd be better if you didn't say I was your father just yet."

"But . . ."

Their heads were close together, their expressions very serious. Duchess put her fist against her mouth to stifle the embarrassment and pain. "It might not work out," Rowdy murmured. "And then you'd be sorry."

Pan put her arm around his neck. "You came," she reminded him. "You were looking for me and Duchess. Wouldn't you want me for your little girl?"

"Of course, but wouldn't Duchess have something to say about that?"

"I suppose you're right. Duchess doesn't know you very well yet. When she does, she'll find out how nice you are." She considered the situation for several seconds, then heaved a sigh. "You'll have to work very hard to get me."

The corners of his mouth twitched, but he kept his face solemn. "A man always has to work hard to get stuff that's worthwhile. I promise to work hard."

"What do you want me to call you if I can't call you Father yet?"

"Just call me what you usually do. Call me Rowdy."

"All right then, Rowdy." Her arms tightened. She planted a butterfly kiss on his cheek. "Duchess will be glad to see you. I'll run right up and get her."

As he hugged Pan hard, his eyes went beyond her and located his quarry crouched on the stairs, tears sparkling in her eyes. He gave a half-smile of apology as he rose.

"How did you find me?" She had asked Mrs. Nance to fix them some tea. He had hung his yellow slicker and gray Stetson on the halltree, and now he sat in the parlor, looking too big for the small room, but nevertheless at ease.

"Whole lot easier than trailing a buck through the *brasada*. It didn't take me much more than an hour." His eyes held hers for emphasis. "I just put on my roundup duds and rode down to the corner where you found me night before last. Pretty soon

my yellow slicker and Stetson had attracted a crowd. Then I just asked."

"Oh, no." Duchess's face reflected her worry. "I've warned everyone I know not to tell."

"Freddy's my friend," Pan explained. "When Rowdy said he was looking for me, Freddy came running. But he was good. He didn't tell where we lived."

"But Freddy didn't need to tell," Rowdy said sternly. "When I mentioned your name, he acted funny. He looked at his friend and whispered in his ear. Anyone would have guessed he knew something."

"And what if Roncie Jack or Big Tilly had tricked him into coming to get you?" Duchess could feel the chillbumps spreading on her arms.

Pan remained undaunted. "Then I would have run away ever so fast."

At that moment Mrs. Nance entered with a tea tray. Conversation halted until she put it down and left.

He raised his hand as she began to pour. "None for me, thank you."

Duchess set the teapot down and pressed her hand against her forehead. "Pansy, you did a very dangerous thing."

"But look who I found," Pansy insisted stubbornly. "Rowdy came to find us. He wants to be my . . ." She clapped her hands to her mouth and stared at him with big eyes. The silence lasted a fraction longer than it should have.

"Er—why don't you go outside and help Freddy watch my horse?" Rowdy suggested. "I can't stay but a minute longer and you haven't had a chance to pet him."

"All right." Pan jumped up and hurried for the door. Shrugging into her coat, she bounced back and helped herself to a handful of biscuits from the tray. "I'll just take these for Freddy. He might be hungry." She clattered out.

Duchess stared hard at Rowdy before dropping her eyes to her hands. "Please don't say anything."

"I have to, Duchess." He stood up and began to pace. His whole frame fairly bristled with purpose. He knew his course. He could see his target. Duchess could see clearly the kind of

man he was as he loomed over her. "You're in danger. When I showed up here, it scared you." He dropped down in front of her and took her hands. "Tell the truth. That's why you were crying, wasn't it?"

"I wasn't crying," she denied huskily.

"Maybe you should be." His stare was serious, intense. "That guy Monro Taine could have found this house just as quick as I did."

She tried to look away, but he pulled her back.

"When I asked Freddy if he knew you, right quick he acted like he had something to hide. Somebody like Dogger would have grabbed him and twisted his arm until he told." He squeezed her hands. "What if I'd been Dogger showing up at the door? That little girl would open the door with her pretty little smile—"

"Stop it!"

"Duchess. You've got to let me help you. If you don't take care of yourself, at least take care of that sweet little girl."

She looked down at him. He was so serious, so handsome. The thought flashed in her mind that he was the first truly good man she had ever known. She gulped. "Pansy is at a very foolish age."

He hesitated. He was pretty sure she had heard all of their conversation. "She's got her dreams."

"And that's all they are," Duchess adopted a severe tone. "Dreams." She stood up, off-balancing him so that he fell backward, catching himself on one long arm. "Empty, foolish dreams."

"There's nothing wrong with dreaming." He rocked forward and rose in one graceful motion. For a man so large, he had perfect muscle control. No one would know from the way he moved that he had been attacked and seriously wounded less than forty hours before.

She could feel a new familiar warmth curling in her belly. Color bloomed in her cheeks at the memory of his long arms around her. A part of her was welcoming the sight of him, even as her common sense screamed at her to send him away.

He was speaking to her. "You can't live here. You'll never

be safe. He'll find you." His next words were like a preacher pronouncing a eulogy. "If he hasn't already."

Driven by fear, she crossed to the window, pulling aside the drapery, staring down at the street below where two children petted a drooping horse. They were safe, but for how long? The rain had stopped, but the sky still threatened. As she plucked at a thread in the lace curtain, she acknowledged to herself that he was right. Aloud she said, "He hasn't so far."

"Damn it, Duchess." He had closed in behind her. She could feel his overpowering presence, his heat, his irritation. "Pardon me, but strong occasions call for strong words. You're just a little girl yourself."

"I'm not."

"Look at me."

She shook her head.

"Look at me!"

Slowly, she turned and stared defiantly into his eyes. They never wavered. Well, she could match his stare. She was just as determined as he to make her own way.

Gradually his expression altered. "How old are you?"

She lifted her chin.

He laid his fingers across her lips. "Tell me the truth."

"Seventeen."

"Damn! This is a whole lot worse than I thought. Duchess, Evelyn, Miss Smythe, you've just got to let me help you. You and that little baby down there are a pair of sitting ducks for those owlhoots."

"We've managed so far."

In a fit of temper he grabbed her hand and thrust it inside his shirtfront where it rested on the last layer of clothing before the wound. "You remember what this looks like? Do you want something like this on you? Or on that baby child down there?"

Her fingers were trembling. Her eyes were brimming with tears. Silently, she began to shake her head. With a groan he caught her to him. "Don't cry," he whispered. "Don't cry. I didn't mean to make you cry. I just want to help you. Please let me. Will you?"

After a long minute, she relaxed. He felt her nod and recog-

nized it as a surrender of a sort. He held her more tightly. "This isn't like you'll be giving up your independence. I'll just be doing the strong-arm stuff. You'll be doing all the tactful stuff. We'll be brains and brawn."

She chuckled. Her breath warmed his chest.

He patted her back. "So you'll help me?"

Again the nod.

He kissed the top of her head. A foolish thing to do. The little girl had put him on his guard. His father and mother would have a fit if he came back married. Not to mention Betty Lou Hale, who'd had him staked out as her private property since the sixth grade.

Still he held her close. Her body nestled against his as she placed her trust in him. He drew in a deep breath. "I've got to leave," he told her. "That poor horse has been standing in the rain and cold long enough. And Freddy and Pan need to be inside where it's warm and dry."

He was reluctant to break the contact with her. Their fingers remained entwined reluctant to let go, pulling their arms away from their bodies before actually parting. "I'll come back tomorrow and we'll plan."

A sudden flush rose in her cheeks. She pulled her hand out of his. "I have to apologize for Pansy." Her voice sounded hoarse. "I didn't even know she wanted a father until—that is . . ."

Shrugging, he sought a likely excuse. "Maybe she got the idea from Freddy."

Duchess nodded. "I suspect it's more likely from the girls at the school. She can't remember any of her life before she was five years old. When I rescued her, she was like a wild animal. I don't know what they did to her, but she came out of the box fighting."

"Box?"

"A coffin. She was nailed shut in one bound for Germany."

Rowdy's face turned white. He cursed vividly. "Did Monro Taine nail that sweet little girl in a damn coffin?"

"Him or someone like him. I was rescuing a few little girls at a time when I found her. She was the smallest I'd ever seen.

But so fierce. She came out fighting and clawing like a lion cub released from a cage. She would back into corners and scratch at anyone who came close. I had a hard time convincing her she was safe. For months she never left my side. Then she suddenly adopted the sunniest disposition in the world. But she couldn't or wouldn't remember anything except her name. I'm not even sure it's hers. When I met Mrs. Shires, we found a place for every other girl but her. I kept her, because I had no place to send her and because it seemed cruel to send her away."

"And because you love her." Rowdy finished wisely.

"Is that so hard to understand?"

"No!" He could well understand adopting someone small and fierce and helpless and learning to love them. He paused with his Stetson in his hand. "Before I go, I have to thank you. Gill's going to get out of jail."

"How did you manage that?"

He grinned and lifted his hat as if he had tipped it to her. "The American consul. Just like you said."

She grinned back.

He placed the hat carefully on his head and rolled his hand along the curved brim. "So it behooves me to thank you properly."

Still grinning like the very devil, he slid his arms round her. She opened her mouth to protest, but before she could prevent him, she was again lifted up on tiptoe. His lips found hers. Warm, moving, like honey sliding from a cone, he kissed her. He tasted just as she remembered, just as she had come to know. She shuddered and then kissed him back.

The room began to drift. Eyes closed, safe against Rowdy's familiar body, she lost her sense of balance. Only the taste and feel of him and the warmth between them had any meaning.

From far away they heard the soft sounds of laughter. Pan and Freddy huddled in the doorway, giggling.

"He's *so* handsome," Pan explained to Freddy. "And she's very beautiful. And brave. They're both brave. They're perfect."

Freddy looked envious. "And he's got a horse. Just like Buffalo Bill."

Grinning, Rowdy lowered Duchess to her feet. With a final

hug he stepped back. Off came the Stetson in a courtly bow worthy of the Western scout turned circus impresario. "Ma'am. I must take my leave of you. But I shall return."

In a sudden burst of humor unlike her usual staid self, she sank into an elaborate execution of a court curtsy. "I will count the hours, sir."

Pansy giggled even though she didn't know what she was giggling about. "You're so funny. Both of you are so funny."

"Funny," he agreed. And ducked out the door. They heard his bootheels thudding, his spurs jingling, and the door slam behind him. All three flew to the window to watch him mount the horse in a single graceful movement. He pulled the animal's head up and turned it in a circle.

Looking up, he saw their faces in the window. With a grin he swept off the Stetson and whirled it round and round his head. Then he touched his spurs to the animal's flanks and galloped away down the street.

"Ooh," Pan sighed.

Duchess's own eyes were shining. She pressed her hands to her heart.

"Four hundred pounds. Four hundred pounds here." The four stiletto-pointed nails drummed once, twice.

How in hell did a runt like Taine get where he was? DeCamp wondered. The Egyptian from the Sudan stood by the desk with arms folded across his chest. His black eyes stared unblinking as the gambler shuffled from one foot to the other. Another man, short and square with arms hanging down to his knees, hung back in the shadows. *God! They couldn't wait to konk him over the head and chuck him in the river.*

He wiped a hand across the lower half of his face. Sweat had beaded his upper lip and his palm felt clammy.

"Four hundred," Taine prodded.

"Four's the word, old chap. Four more days. You gave me a week. It's not half gone," DeCamp protested.

"I like to keep up with you bloody aristocrats. England's a friggin' debtor's prison 'cause you don't pay up—to nobody."

Fascinated, the gambler watched the knifelike nails of the thumb and third finger. More delicate than any lady, Taine selected a match from the well and raked it across the brass file of the striker. A great gray cloud of smoke almost obscured the procurer's pale face.

"It takes longer to make these things work," DeCamp argued. "But the rewards are worth the trouble. More trouble, more money."

"Just so you don't forget," Taine whispered. "Dogger."

The thug came out the shadows in a rush. DeCamp had time to throw up an arm, which was promptly seized in an iron grasp. A vicious twist bent him over the desk, his cheek pressed inches from the fingernails. A quick kick knocked DeCamp's legs out from under him. His position and the pain in his shoulder rendered him helpless. He gave a howl of agony.

No one appeared to be affected. Indeed, the Egyptian had scarcely moved. the gambler closed his eyes, then opened them again as the nails drummed next to his nose. "Listen, you bloody fag," Taine sneered. "Your kind ain't no more to me than the ragged arses off the streets. Never. Not ever. Four days and it's lyin' here, or you will be. Understand."

"Yes. Yes."

Badger gave an extra sharp twist.

DeCamp howled again. "Don't break it. Don't break it."

Taine nodded. Dogger eased off. "Right. You wouldn't want to deprive a friggin' gentleman of his livelihood. No, you wouldn't."

DeCamp struggled up. "You'll get your money," he groaned, massaging the shoulder. The pain had eased off only marginally. Another minute and he would have been crippled. The thought of not being able to use his arm and hand to deal and arrange his cards made him furious. A word or two in the right places might make things hot for Taine. He vowed he would do what he could.

"In four days," Taine was saying.

DeCamp did not answer. He was struggling too hard to conceal his anger.

The procurer chuckled. A gesture, and the Egyptian led DeCamp from the room.

Bright and early, Rowdy pulled the bell at Duchess's house. Somewhere in the interior, he could hear its ring. Day had dawned with a shining sun. Rowdy believed this was the first time he had seen the sun since he and Gill had been in England. Behind the frosted glass and lace curtains, he could hear footsteps, light, hurrying. He smiled and swept off the Stetson.

"Mornin', Duchess."

She opened the door, her expression serious. "Good morning to you, sir."

Taking a step backward on the stoop, he made a low bow. From the lowest point he cocked his head up at her. "On a beautiful day like this, you ought to have a smile."

She let her face relax and stepped aside. "Come in."

He straightened, still smiling, and passed through. As if he belonged, he hung his hat on the halltree. Pan came clattering down the stairs. "Rowdy!" She launched herself from the fifth step. "Rowdy!"

"Whoa there!" He caught her and swung her up above his shoulders. Yesterday she had squealed with terror. Now she squealed with delight.

"What are you doing?" Duchess darted to his side, ready to catch the child should she be dropped. "Be careful."

Rowdy looked at her in surprise. "I'm swinging her up in the air. Shucks, kids just love that. Papa used to swing all of us boys until we'd be dizzy. She doesn't weigh anything. Light as a feather. No way I could drop her."

"But you were . . . that is . . ." Duchess looked at Mrs. Nance, who was descending the stairs in her coat and hat to take Pan to school. Mrs. Nance was smiling. "I thought—"

"It's fun. Rowdy is so strong," Pan assured her as he lowered her to her feet. "I was scared the first time he did it, but now it's like flying." She caught Duchess's hand and pulled her in front of the Texan. "Can you do it for Duchess?"

"Pansy!"

"Sure." Before she could move, his big hands closed round her waist.

"Don't you dare! Don't . . . ooooooh!"

"My goodness!" Mrs. Nance exclaimed as Rowdy swung Duchess off her feet, her skirts flaring wide.

"Stop! Put me down!" She clutched at his arms, angry at his affrontery, afraid of falling. The high ceiling of the entry hall was inches from the top of her head. Her feet were a good yard off the floor.

Pan whooped with glee and danced up and down. "Isn't it fun? Isn't it nice? Isn't Rowdy strong? Wouldn't it be wonderful if he were our father?" The words were out before she remembered. In horror she clapped her hands over her mouth.

Duchess closed her eyes against the embarrassment and the fear. No one in her memory had lifted her off the ground, much less above his head. No father had ever played with her as Rowdy had played with Pan. She had never known loving uncles nor mischievous brothers.

When she opened her eyes, a new awareness dawned on her. She looked down into the laughing turquoise eyes of the man who would have been her lover had he not been a gentleman. Rowdy's hands were hot and strong where he held her. Her body remembered the feel of him in bed, the warmth, the urgency, and the gentleness. She closed her eyes again to block out the sight of what she dared not possess—all the joy, all the excitement, all the pleasure.

"Duchess," he murmured.

Unable to look down into his laughing face, she let out her breath slowly as she felt him start to lower her. She reached with her toes, touched with the tip of one. An instant's hesitation before she felt herself lifted again. Only a fraction. Then out of the darkness, his mouth descended on hers.

The pleasure was exquisite. Infinitely sensual, sending shock waves through her body, leaving her almost paralyzed with pleasure, wanting more. Her hands tightened on his arms.

He kissed her, licked the seam of her mouth. Never in her life had she felt so vulnerable. He slid his tongue in to caress her when she sighed. Her arms slid round his neck as she kissed

him back without thought, without embarrassment, accepting and giving pleasure.

Somewhere in the distance, Pan's giggle jarred her. They were kissing in the middle of the entry hall. The door stood open to the street. The housekeeper was an interested witness.

"Perhaps we'd better be off for school, Miss Pansy," Mrs. Nance chirped.

"Oh, but Rowdy . . ."

"I think they have many things to discuss." Mrs. Nance took the little girl firmly by the hand and led her out. The door clicked behind them.

Rowdy did not release Duchess's mouth until he had lowered her to her feet and steadied her. Then he drew back a dazed smile on his face. His dark red eyebrows arched up.

"Why did you do that?" she whispered.

"To tell the truth, it just felt like the most natural thing in the world." He was not laughing as he had been when the kiss began. Instead, he was regarding her with something of a sober expression.

"You're wrong," she contradicted, tugging her skirt back into place and touching her hand to her hair. "It was the most unnatural thing in the world and don't do it again."

He smiled in mockery. "Guess that's what turned your cheeks so red, ma'am."

She led the way into the small parlor. In the center of the carpet she swung around to face him. "This is all a mistake. I've tried to get away from you time and again."

"But we just keep turning up in each other's lives," Rowdy pointed out. "Must be fate or something like that."

Why would he use that word when she had thought the very thing herself? The way they kept coming back together was all too strange.

"I don't believe in fate," she said sternly. "I don't believe in anything supernatural. I think you're just a man who wants his own way. You don't like being thwarted. You've said you need a woman who knows something of society to warn you away from the swindlers. But I'm not that woman."

"Sure you are. Who more than you? You know who they really are."

"I don't know any good men!" Her voice rose and cracked.

He pointed a long index finger at her. "Right. If you know them, I won't want to have anything to do with them."

She shook her head. "That's crazy. You're crazy."

He shrugged. "You're not the first person to tell me that. But in a crazy way it makes perfect sense. Think it over. Take a minute."

While she stared, he seated himself in the most comfortable chair, crossed one booted ankle over his knee, and pulled a long slim cigarillo from his breast pocket. "Mind if I smoke?"

She barely heard him. Folding her arms across her bosom, she crossed to the window and stared out into the street. His reasoning actually made a kind of perverted sense. His experience had made him wary of London society. And who could blame him?

He had found he could not deal with the pretenders and the parasites. If he met a man with a title or a fine suit of clothes, he could not tell whether the man was a successful businessman or a ne'er-do-well. Inquiries among the man's associates would reveal nothing.

The British regarded the Americans as well as the other foreigners who landed by the shiploads on their shores as upstarts and fair game. Many times visitors were fleeced and sent home with empty pockets and poor-quality goods. Everyone laughed and thought they were well served.

Her knowledge of the underworld would provide young Mr. MacPherson with information about who was down on his luck, who was debt-ridden, which was a dilettante, who was an alcoholic. And if she did not know herself, she knew whom to ask.

Mrs. Shires knew everyone. She would sponsor them. She would go everywhere and mingle with the very society she was born to, on the arm of a handsome young man, even though he was an American.

A secret thrill swept her. A small measure of vengeance might be possible against one or two men like her father who

regarded wives and mistresses, as well as all other women, as creatures of no importance with no minds or feelings. Depriving them of a sale would wound them more deeply than rescuing a few helpless girls from brothels. It was a tempting thought.

And to execute it, she would have the opportunity to go about with the tall man who sat silently regarding her. She would see him every day. He would touch her. She would put her hand in his. She knew herself to be infinitely susceptible to him.

Even has she opened her mouth to acquiesce, he took her hands. "Listen, Duchess, you help me go back to Texas with prime breeding stock and I promise I'll take care of Monro Taine. He'll disappear slick as a whistle, and you'll be able to do whatever you want to do however long you want to do it."

The warmth of his big hands seemed to spread throughout her whole body. More than anything in her life, she wanted to do this—not for him, but for reasons of her own. "All right."

His white-toothed smile dazzled her. Before the words were out of her mouth, he swept her up in a bear hug that lifted her off the floor again. "That's my girl!"

"Stop it!" She pushed at him, but he swung her around and set her down in front of the door. "You've got to stop doing that," she sputtered angrily.

His smile never faltered. He might as well have told her she would get many, many more hugs. "Come on." He led her out into the entry way, then halted. "What can I call you?"

"Duchess," she insisted.

"Not in front of everybody. It wouldn't sound right." He cocked his head to one side. "Evelyn?"

She hesitated. "Miss Smythe."

He shook his head. "You're going to make a liar out of me, ma'am. Nobody will believe your name is Smythe. But have it your own way." He lifted his hat from the hall tree. "Let's go for a ride."

He drew her out onto the stoop. "I brought two horses this time. I thought the day's so pretty . . ."

She stared at them as if they were elephants. "I don't ride."

For the first time she got his attention. "What?"

She wrapped her arms protectively around her body. "You heard correctly. I don't ride. I've never been on a horse in my life."

He looked her up and down as if she were a strange creature. *I'll have to teach her to ride before I can take her back to Texas.* He blinked. Where had that thought come from? He must be out of his mind. For an instant, he thought about calling the whole thing off. He thought about how he couldn't keep his hands off her, thought about how he found himself picking her up and kissing her with no more reason than he wanted to do it.

He ought to be running from this woman instead of trying to find excuses to go around town with her. She wasn't the sort of person that would fit right in in Texas. She couldn't even ride.

One more thing to teach her. With a grin he took her hand and led her down the steps. "We'll just have to do something about that."

Chapter Fourteen

Debut

By midafternoon, well after the fashionable hour for a ride in the park, Duchess found herself dressed in the latest in riding attire, a black worsted wool divided skirt, a charming jacket in houndstooth check with black velvet revers, a stylish hat with a tied-back veil, and black boots of Cordovan leather. Despite her protests, all had been purchased from Harrod's Department Store. Her regular clothes had been carefully boxed up with instructions to deliver them to her address.

The Texan then took her arm through his and paraded her from the store. Among the mostly women shoppers, all in the usual walking suits, they drew many smiles and not a few curious looks. Duchess's cheeks were burning as a full-length mirror reflected the spectacle they were creating.

Rowdy MacPherson's red hair and handsome features would have drawn more than a few looks at the outset. Turned out as he was, close to seven feet tall in his high-heeled Western boots and high crowned hat, he was the cynosure of all eyes. And on his arm, she felt a secret thrill at the sight of herself in truly well-made clothing that fit her near to perfection and followed the current fashion.

A couple of blocks behind the huge store on a quiet side street, the groom waited with their horses.

"That's not a sidesaddle."

"Nope. Just swing your leg right on up."

Before she could think of an appropriate protest, he lifted her into the saddle of a docile bay mare.

The saddle pushed her legs apart and shocked her as she felt the unaccustomed pressure against her inner thighs. More embarrassing, it moved with every breath of the mare. "I don't think this feels right," she murmured, blushing.

She looked at Rowdy for some reassurance, but he was busy setting her feet in the stirrups and adjusting their length. "It won't take long to get used to."

"Why is this horse called a bay?" She eyed the pavement so far away with some trepidation. "A bay is a green leaf. A bay is an expanse of blue water. The horse is dark red with black mane and tail."

He shrugged. "That's just the English language for you. A bay's a leaf and a stretch of water and also the color of a horse. It's also something coyotes do when they howl at the moon. Just take my word for it. This horse is a bay."

"And is yours an ocean?" she shot back, giving as good as she got as he climbed onto the big dapple gray gelding.

His Western saddle creaked as he swung up and settled himself. "I think I'll just ignore that question. Now pay attention. We're going to start off at a walk. Just press your heels back against her sides. She'll move."

The horse did indeed move. Duchess swayed and clutched at the pommel. "How do I hang on? My saddle doesn't have one of those big things in front."

"That's a horn." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Hang on with your legs. If you have to. But mostly, just sit on her and feel the rhythm of her walk. That's the easiest. She's like a rocking chair. I went over to the livery stable and picked her out myself this morning. Had the stirrups let down so you could ride her Western style."

"You were so sure I'd get on?"

He nodded. He let his hand drop off her shoulder. She imitated as best she could the way he sat in the saddle and held

the reins. Their horses walked side by side down the quiet street. The groom followed at a discreet distance.

Up ahead a couple of boys pitched a ball back and forth. Rowdy appeared to be watching them. She was surprised when he spoke. "I was sure you had too much spunk not to ride. And you'd already made up your mind to come with me. You're too smart to cut off your nose to spite your face. You might not think I'm exactly what you need, but you're in a heap of trouble. A mighty mean hombre is out to get you. The deck's stacked in his favor. I'm the only hope you and that sweet little Pan 've got, short of leaving town."

"Oh, I have some other choices." She lied without compunction. He was behaving as if he owned her.

"Now that's hogwash and you know it."

She was coming to understand most of what he said. She shot him a quelling look before directing her stare to the street between her horse's ears. "'Hogwash,'" he'd said. She really didn't have to ask what that meant.

They turned into Grosvenor Street, where traffic was heavier. "We need to pick up the pace," Rowdy told her. "Now pay attention. Feel the horse under you. Settle yourself in the saddle and we'll just lope along here. Sway with her. Ride her. You'll get used to the gait before you know it."

"If you say so."

"You're doing fine, for somebody who's never been on a horse before. You've got a good seat, light hands, and nerve. You're a natural-born rider."

"Thank you." She felt absurdly pleased at his compliment. Compliments had been few in her life.

He touched his heels to the gelding's barrel. Without Duchess doing anything, the mare matched the other horse's stride.

For a few minutes the easy lope jarred her teeth, but as he had predicted, she soon got the rhythm. Then it was almost pleasant to move along at a faster pace. Riding was proving to be more entertaining than she had imagined.

Was she a natural-born rider? His words made her wonder about the life she had never known. As a child would she have

loved a pony and later a horse? She looked down at the long black mane shining on the mare's neck.

He caught the beginnings of a smile on her face. "I knew you'd like it," he crowed. Then without a qualm, he added, "I'll make a Texan out of you yet."

They rested on one of the benches beneath the barren arms of a magnificent spreading oak. From time to time a man or woman would gallop by. At a distance she could see children playing. Nursemaids strolled with their charges or clustered together gossiping while babies napped in black prams.

"Is your cousin free?"

"Finally. Gill's back at the hotel soaking in a hot bath. He says his next move is to order everything on the menu and eat it all. Then he's going to sleep in a bed with clean sheets."

"It must have been terrible for him."

Rowdy stretched his long legs out in front of him and tilted his hat forward over his eyes. "About the worst thing you can imagine." His voice shook slightly. "Gill's a straight arrow. Never got into a lick of trouble. This whole deal has just knocked him for a loop."

"I can imagine."

"He asked me what his folks would say. I just looked at him. He's going to tell them what happened. He's that kind of man." Abruptly he sat up straight. Elbows on his knees, he let his hands dangle between them as he stared glumly at the tranquil scene. "I've got a list as long as my arm of scrapes I'd never tell my folks I got into. And this was all my fault. I was the one who took up with these fellas. Gill was the one who got hurt."

Duchess put her hand over his. "He's not hurt. And his people will understand and probably be outraged that their son was treated so unjustly."

He looked at her directly. "You might as well know that Gill roped and hogtied me and dragged me to that art gallery that night where I met you. The best thing that happened to me in this whole blasted country. And he was the reason for it."

She could feel a blush rising in her cheeks.

"Maybe the best thing that's *ever* happened to me," he said, so low she could barely hear the words. Then he kicked at a pebble in the grass beneath their feet. "We need to go out tonight, but he's not feeling too well. Caught a bad cold in that damned jail."

"I'm sorry."

He looked at her sideways. "Course, you and I could go by ourselves, Evelyn."

He's been leading up to this all along, she thought. "That wouldn't be proper—er—Randolph. It is Randolph, isn't it? I don't have an invitation and besides we are unchaperoned."

"I don't look much like a Randolph, do I?" He grinned engagingly. "Well, now that's where you're wrong—I do have an invitation tonight. From the American consul. And since it's for two people and Gill can't go . . ."

She was shaking her head in protest.

"This is where you start helping me. And besides it ought to be fun. Let's do it. I'm game to be Randolph if you'll be Evelyn."

From his somewhat garbled speech, she was able to figure out that the party was in the way of a business introduction. Of course, without his friend to accompany them, she should flatly refuse. Three in the party would make a buffer that was becoming absolutely necessary between them.

Rowdy gave her a familiar nudge, rather like Pansy would have done. "While you're making up your mind, Evelyn, remember the quicker I get my cattle, the quicker I'm gone. And you'd be doing Gill a favor too, 'cause he could get back to Texas quicker."

She found it impossible to be angry or affronted at him. With an exaggerated sigh, she capitulated. "Very well, Randolph, if you will tell me the truth. Was all that story of how wonderful Gill is and how bad you feel an act to get my sympathy?"

He managed to look wounded and guilty at the same time. His lips quivered, unable to suppress the smile. "Every word I said about Gill is the truth."

His smile finished the debate. How she was going to miss

him. She had never known a man so guileless. She rose and adjusted the veil of her new hat. "In that case I want Gill to get back to Texas before you manage to get him hurt. Let's go."

He smiled up at her. "The ambassador's going to take us to a party tonight. Some music and a late supper. Are you game?"

"Music and a late supper," she replied with a flirtatious smile. "It sounds quite, quite lovely."

"Just remember, Duchess. I'll find you out yet," he promised direly. "And when I do . . ." With a lithe movement, he rose and swept her into his arms. Heedless that they were out of doors in a public place, he delivered a kiss that would have set her knees to wobbling if they had had to bear her weight.

She locked her arms around his waist and pressed her body along the length of his. The kiss went on and on, demanding, heating her. With every kiss and every touch, he was teaching her body to respond. A part of her tried to shout a warning, but the rest stood blindly, eyes closed, mouth open, breathing in the scent of him, swept away in a crashing wave of desire.

At last he lifted his head and sucked in a deep breath. Keeping one arm around her shoulders, he slipped the other under her knees. The world swung in a wide arc as he lifted her into the saddle. When she opened her eyes, he was looking up at her with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

She blinked, cleared her throat, and gathered the reins. "We—we'd better hurry."

Only after he settled himself in the saddle and they were passing through the gates of the park did she realize that he was armed. Her hands had clutched his gunbelt under his coat.

Lord Cheviot had lost his icy demeanor for the first time in his adult life. He flung open the door of Revill's office and fairly leaped across the floor. "What's the meaning of this letter?"

Revill's eyes dropped to the crumpled paper the man slammed down on the desk before him.

Cheviot's solicitor had informed him that the American consul had secured the release of Guillermo Sandoval.

Revill rose slowly until his solid body and broad shoulders were even with the slender viscount's. "It seemed a reasonable thing for all concerned," he said mildly.

"Reasonable! Reasonable!" Cheviot snatched the paper up and wadded it into a ball. "The man attacked me. A peer of the realm. The scion of the Earl of Audley."

Revill's voice continued mild. "And has he attacked you again?"

Cheviot closed his babbling jaw. He straightened and shook the pale blond hair back from his forehead. "No. That is, not yet. But I'm sure he'll want to get his own back."

Revill let his eyes roam over the young man. If this was a prime example of the heirs of the empire, then from where Revill stood, the empire was going to be hard put for strength and intelligence in the future.

Cheviot flushed beneath the man's calculating stare. He lowered his arm.

Revill walked around the desk and, without touching his visitor, herded him to the open door. "Let me know if you have any trouble with him."

Cheviot found himself standing in the hall with the door closed in his face.

"The American's out of jail."

Taine's features worked. He plucked at the buttons on his vest. He dragged hard on his cigar and blew the smoke into the air. "Good! Good! Go round to DeCamp and collect the money this evening."

The Egyptian looked skeptical.

Taine pointed at him with the chewed end. "Never give a gambler a chance to get a table."

"What if he doesn't want to pay? He still has two days."

Taine bared his stained teeth. "Do I need to tell you when to take a piss? Take Dogger with you. Break an arm if you have to."

"You look ever so beautiful. Ever, ever so." Pan rested her cheek on the back of the chair and studied Duchess with shining eyes.

"Thank you."

Mrs. Nance had revealed a talent hitherto unknown. She had brushed Duchess's waist-length hair and swept it up onto the crown of her head. From there she had coaxed out three long curls that brushed her right shoulder.

"Your dress is beautiful," Pan agreed. Half crooning, she elaborated on her dream. "Rowdy's going to be so happy. When he comes, Mrs. Nance will open the door. You'll walk down the stairs like a princess de—de—descending from her tower. He'll kneel at your feet and kiss your hand. You'll fall deeply in love and you'll live happy ever after."

"Pansy!" Duchess pressed her fingertips to her forehead, where a headache was developing between her eyes. "Where did you get such ideas?"

The little girl giggled. "I can read now. I know all about falling in love."

"Tomorrow I intend to look at your books," Duchess threatened. Inwardly, she was trembling. All sorts of terrible things could happen tonight. Being at a formal dinner party where people scrutinized the guests closely was far different from the Tate Gallery or even a country weekend. She could make a social gaff that would ruin Rowdy's chances. Someone could recognize her and denounce her. She pressed her hands tight against her stomach where butterflies the size of storks flapped insistent wings.

Mrs. Nance stood back to study her handiwork. "That dress is certainly beautiful enough to make anyone fall in love. Especially if he's leaning that way."

"Stop it. Both of you." Duchess hurriedly rose and twitched her train aside. Determined as she was not to be seduced by all the finery, she could not keep herself from looking in the full-length mirror. Never had she dreamed she would own a dress like this. It was quite the most exquisite thing she had

ever seen. Deep scallops of ecru lace fell over bronze taffeta with bows in flounces all around the skirt. A corset compressed her already tiny waist into the requisite hourglass figure, and a bustle lifted the skirt out behind her into a train the envy of any court. The neckline was low, but not indecently so. Bronze taffeta ruching across her breasts and around her shoulders complemented the color of her eyes and hair.

"Oh, ma'am, you must pick out something of your mother's to wear with it," Mrs. Nance urged.

Duchess looked again in the mirror. The dress was perfect. Her hair was perfect. Her long white gloves were perfect. And Mrs. Nance was right. She had not thought ever to wear the jewelry when Clarice had given it to her. Now she seemed to be opening the box regularly. "Let's see what she has. Although I don't know whether it will be proper. It might be too old-fashioned."

With Pan dancing at her side, she went to the armoire to fetch the mahogany case.

"I'll carry it for you," Pan offered. Practically wresting it from her idol's hands, she raced to set it on the dressing table. She was running her palm over the smooth wood when Duchess reseated herself and flicked the little hasp up. "Oo-o-o-oh."

A parure of pearls—choker, earbobs, and bracelets—lay in the first tray. The inch-wide fastenings were palest yellow gold.

"Perfect, ma'am," Mrs. Nance declared.

Her fingers trembling, Duchess lifted them out and allowed the housekeeper to fasten them at her neck, her ears, and her wrists.

"Where'd you get them?" Pan wanted to know, her little fingers resting on the bottom of the tray as if she could somehow feel through to the treasures that lay beneath.

Duchess stared silently at the stranger in the mirror. At last she spoke, "Lady Clarice Montague gave them to me. They were my mothers."

"You're beautiful in them, ma'am. They're just the right touch," Mrs. Nance complimented her again.

"I was told I resemble her," Duchess said. Her hand strayed to the earbob. "She's been dead a long time."

"Maybe you ought to look underneath to see if you've got something better," Pan suggested, her fingertips caressing the gold satin lining.

Mrs. Nance frowned. "The pearls are perfect."

"But she might have something that would be all gold," Pan objected.

Duchess smiled. "Let's see what we can find."

The door bell rang.

"Rats," Pan cried. "There's Rowdy." She whirled and dashed out of the bedroom. "Rowdy! Rowdy!"

"The child surely thinks the world of that man," Mrs. Nance remarked as she held the bronze taffeta cloak to drape over her lady's shoulders.

"I know." Duchess rose. "And she's doomed to disappointment."

Downstairs in the entry way, Pan had her arms locked around Rowdy's neck. "... and you must kneel at her feet ..." She heard the door open upstairs. She put her lips to his ear to whisper, "... and kiss her hand."

Rowdy grinned. "It's a deal."

Carrying Pan to the foot of the stairs, he watched Duchess.

"Just like a princess descending from her tower," Pan whispered.

"Exactly."

When Duchess was halfway down, their faces came into view, upturned, smiling, eyes alight with mischief, sharing a delicious secret. She hesitated. Her own mouth curved upward. She came down the last half-dozen steps.

Rowdy dropped to one knee, set Pan aside, and held out his hand.

Duchess put her own in it. With their eyes firmly locked, she accepted his homage. While Pan almost swooned with joy, Rowdy kissed first the back of her hand and then the palm.

"Evelyn," he murmured.

"Randolph," she replied.

"You look beautiful," he murmured. "Like a . . ." He looked to Pan.

"Like a princess in a tower." Her eyes shone like stars.

Rowdy rose, keeping Duchess's hand in his. "Your royal highness, your coach awaits to carry you off to the ball."

At his words Pan fell into another fit of giggles. "Is it a pumpkin? Does it turn back into a pumpkin at midnight?"

"Not this one," Rowdy assured her. "This is a different fairy tale."

"But they all end happily ever after," Pan reminded them.

The soprano's rendition of Dido's "Lament for Aeneas" was done in such piercing tones that Rowdy gritted his teeth. He had never heard an opera sung before, nor did he know who Aeneas was. To him a dido was a joke someone played on someone else. During the applause, he leaned closer to Duchess. "Did you like that?"

"Not particularly," she whispered back.

"Glad to hear it."

At the supper buffet, he looked with some amazement at the dozens of different ways fish could be prepared. He looked at either side of Duchess's neck. "I was just checking you for gills."

She smiled. "England is an island. Fresh fish live in the waters all around us."

"They must be throwing themselves up on the shore," he groaned. "I could sure do with a thick steak right now and some Mexican style *frijoles* and cornbread." He poked dismally at something concealed beneath a thick white sauce.

Daniel Sawyer appeared at that moment. "I say, MacPherson, understand you're looking for Hereford. You should talk to Sir Charles Stowers. If you care to, I'll seat you at their table."

He pointed to a portly man just seating an equally portly lady with an old-fashioned emerald green turban. "Fill your plates and follow me. I'll make the introductions."

"Does he own good stock?" Rowdy asked as he slid a serving fork under yet another piece of white flesh in a cream sauce.

"Oh, the best. The very best. I assure you." The consul glanced at Rowdy's choice. "So glad to see you trying the eel pies, my good man. Most Americans turn up their noses at really true British food."

The Texan smiled weakly. "You're sure right about that."

Duchess waited until the host had moved away to chuckle in Rowdy's ear. "I'm sure you'll find it very tasty."

He laid the fork back on the serving plate. "Probably tastes just like chicken."

Duchess frowned thoughtfully. "Stowers sits high on the board of a couple of banks that make loans on London real estate. Several expensive brothels pay large sums to those banks. He may also have fine cattle."

"But he might not because he gets most of his money from other things. Maybe we'll just eat supper alone and I'll ask around later. I don't want to get trapped into buying from him. I was nearly trapped before," he added. He guided her past the vaunted eel pies and made a face at the huge silver tray of raw oysters.

"He lives most of the time in London," she agreed. Taking pity on the Texan, she helped his plate to fine Double Gloucester cheese melted on toast points, some slices of Beef Yorkshire, and Russian caviar on soda biscuits.

"What's that, Evelyn?" He stared suspiciously at the heap of tiny black beads.

"Very fine food, Randolph."

When they were seated at a table far from the Sir Charles and Lady Betty Stowers, he surveyed the room. "Who don't you know?"

"Actually, I don't know anybody. And fortunately, nobody knows me. I'd have to hear their names."

He took an experimental bite of the caviar and set it down. "Too salty."

Later, while the men smoked their cigars and drank their brandy, Duchess listened to the edges of the women's conversation.

She might have been a piece of furniture for all the attention she received. She told herself the situation was ideal. She did

not care that they were tacitly rude to her. She held her head high and sipped once or twice at the sherry while she waited for the gossip to turn to husbands. After almost half an hour she was ready to scream. Fashion and servants occupied an inordinant amount of the women's time.

Finally, the hostess turned to a quiet lady from Upton-on-Severn. "Have you persuaded Sir Charles to remain in town for the remainder of the opera season, Lady Betty?"

Lady Betty Stowers's face crumpled. "I've begged and begged, but he will not be away from Montmarch so long."

"Oh, my dear. How very tiresome!" The room was abuzz with such polite murmurs of sympathy.

"Indeed." Languidly, she waved a painted parchment fan as she told her tale of woe. "You would think that cattle could stand in the fields all day and eat without his being there to watch them, but evidently that is not so."

"Perhaps you can persuade him to allow you to stay with me," one offered.

"No, I shall go with him." Lady Betty assumed a long suffering demeanor. "He is very good to me and to our children, who are all healthy except for Cecilia, who . . ."

The talk turned to the illnesses and tribulations of rearing children, but Duchess finished her sherry with satisfaction. Sir Charles and Lady Betty would get a visit tomorrow from Rowdy MacPherson and Gill Sandoval.

He couldn't get enough of her.

He had been able to pull himself off her and regain some control when she was dressed as a ragpicker on the streets. Likewise, his own pain and exhaustion had damped down his desires in his bed in the hotel.

Now he held her in his arms, perfumed and coiffed, dressed as an English lady of rank, in a dress more beautiful than any he had ever seen. Moreover, she was warm and vulnerable in his arms. Her arms clung round his neck, her lips opened under his.

One of his arms gathered her tightly against his chest, the

other slid over her hip and down her thigh. She whimpered against his mouth as he tugged at her skirt.

His mind whispered to him to stop, but his blood was raging. The delicious taste of her, the feel of warm, silken flesh beneath his hand.

His trailed kisses down her throat, nibbled at her ear. "Duchess," he whispered, "you are one beautiful lady."

She shuddered. Unwillingly, her thigh lifted against his hand, encouraged him to slide along it, to dive beneath the lace and silk of her undergarments.

The carriage clopped down the street, swaying gently.

He fastened his mouth to hers again and pushed her back onto the seat. Lying half on top of her, he slid his hand up to cover the hot jointure between her parted thighs. With his other hand he freed himself from his clothing.

She clasped him close, whimpering, stirring restlessly, encouraged by his knowing fingers, beginning the desperate dance of desire that drowned caution and common sense.

She was as passionate as he. He found her most secret place, wet, hot, ready for him. One long finger slid into her while his thumb circled the nub of nerves, making her cry with pleasure. He kissed her cheeks and tasted the salty tears.

"You're crying."

He could feel her nod. "I've never felt anything like this. It's so beautiful."

"Oh, for God's sake!" he moaned. He lifted his head away from her face and dropped his forehead onto her chest. "Please don't say that. Evelyn," he gasped suddenly.

"W-what?" She could not sustain her loss. Starved for kisses and touches, hungering for the male, totally vulnerable to her body's sensation, she drove her fingers into the thick red hair and pulled him back to her mouth.

He jerked his hand out from under her dress. "Evelyn. For heaven's sake, call me Randolph."

She cried out as if he had stabbed her. "Oh, please . . ."

"It's your first time," he groaned.

"What?" She shook her head. Her whole body shook. "No.

No. It's not . . . I'm not . . . please don't . . . oh, please . . . Rowdy . . ."

He was shuddering now, rock hard, sweat beading his forehead. "Evelyn . . . Duchess . . ."

She rose up, sliding her arm around his neck, drawing him back to her mouth. At the same time she pushed up against him.

All sense of decency, of right and wrong, of gentlemanly behavior was swept away. He was a man with a beautiful desirable woman who wanted him as much as he wanted her.

"Goddammit, Duchess." He tore apart the lace and satin, shifted his big body. His shaft throbbed, hot and heavy, straining.

Her first time, his conscience whispered. *This is her first time. Easy does it, Rowdy, easy, easy, easy.*

She stiffened and cried out as he pushed into her. Her head dropped back on the seat as she sucked in a great lungful of air. He reached the fragile barrier. What had his papa told him?

He slipped one hand beneath her buttocks and the other beneath her head. Lifting at the same time, he sank his teeth into her earlobe above the pearl earbob.

She cried out sharply. The pain from the bite distracted her from the deeper wounding. He slid in all the way, settling most of himself inside her before she was quite aware of what had happened. She was much too small. Too small to accommodate his full length. But the tightness and hot wetness were ecstasy.

He had never felt a woman so smooth and slick, so tight and hot. He had never had a virgin before.

He gritted his teeth against the explosion that threatened to occur before he had moved even once. *Think of her. Concentrate on her. Make it good for her.*

He kissed her ear, soothed it with his tongue and lips. Felt her body relax slightly as nature took control of her.

"It hurts," she whispered.

"I'm sorry."

Even as she spoke, her arms went around his shoulders. "Oh, Rowdy."

"Duchess." He began to move, pulling himself out, sliding back in. She joined in the rhythm.

She stretched and arched beneath him, seeking comfort, seeking something.

He lost control. A red-hot mist rolled across his vision. He pulled back, sobbing his own longing. And impaled her almost his full length and flooded her with his passion.

As his pelvis ground against hers, the convulsions sent her over the precipice to join him in swirling ecstasy.

Chapter Fifteen

No Other Course but Love

In a daze Rowdy MacPherson walked into the lobby of the Ritz, paying no heed to anyone, scarcely aware of where he was. The feeling of well-being in his body was directly opposed by the condemning voice of his conscience. From the time he had left Duchess, he had thought about what he had done. All the way back to the hotel, his guilt had ridden him hard.

He had to marry her.

And quickly.

No other course lay open to him. He was a gentleman. She was a lady. Rowdy and Duchess might have misbehaved together, but Randolph and Evelyn must get married.

Very real was the probability that she had conceived his child. Why then could he feel a smile starting at the edges of his mouth? He hoped it was a boy. In his mind's eye he could see him setting his son on a stumpy-legged paint pony and riding beside him across the Texas prairies.

He would teach the boy to ride, to fish, to hunt.

His own mother would be thrilled. His father would slap him on the back as he had his brother when Chris and his wife had made their announcement. Now they had two girls.

Another surge of pride made his smile widen in earnest until he was grinning. He would get one up on old Chris and have

the first grandson. He had the urge to let loose with a loud warwhoop. He would name him—

“MacPherson.”

Startled, he glanced up. So far away was he, riding the Texas prairies, that he failed to recognize the man who had stepped in front of him and laid hold of his arm.

“MacPherson, we have to talk.”

The dream evaporated, leaving him in the middle of the overdecorated lobby of the Ritz, staring down into the angry face of the “Dishonorable” Clarence DeCamp. “Now that’s just where you’re wrong,” the Texan contradicted him. “We don’t have a thing to say to each other.”

DeCamp tightened his grip. “See here . . .”

Rowdy gave him a sharp push. “I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow. If you’ve got anything to say, let your lawyer talk to the American consul.”

“Lawyers be damned. This is between you and me and Cheviot.”

Rowdy’s eyes flashed round the hotel lobby to spot the slender figure in the shadow of a draped archway. “So the viscount wants to get a piece of this too, does he? If he comes one step closer, what he’s going to get is a piece of my fist in his face. And I hit a hell of a lot harder than Gill does.”

DeCamp’s head reeled beneath the Texan’s anger. He tried valiantly to calm the man. “Don’t take that attitude,” he protested. “Listen. If you’ll only buy the cattle, Cheviot will be happy to drop the charges. He pays me what he owes me and we’re all quits all the way around.”

Cheviot stepped out into the light although he maintained a safe distance. “They really are the very best Herefords, MacPherson. You’ll find none better in England.”

Rowdy’s eyes blazed. “Even if they were the best cattle in Europe—which they’re not—I don’t think Gill could stand to take care of them on the trip home. They’d probably make him sick to his stomach.”

Stepping between the two men, the gambler tried again. “See here, MacPherson. Those cattle are as good as you get anywhere. A fine herd . . .”

Rowdy snorted. "For your information, DeCamp, one third of the Audley crop last spring was dwarfed. I'm not going to buy from a bull that produces stock like that."

Rowdy's objections meant nothing to DeCamp, who raised his voice to drown out the words. "... and your friend gets the charges dropped unconditionally. And I get my money."

"Get it somewhere else." Rowdy closed his hand over the gambler's wrist and pulled the man up in his face. "Get the hell out of here and don't come near Gill or me again." He strode toward the desk to pick up his key.

"No. By God..." DeCamp could see a great deal of money as well as his life striding away from him. His temper, laced with fear of Monro Taine, exploded. Lunging after the taller man, he caught Rowdy by the shoulder and threw a punch.

The Texan blocked it with his shoulder and returned a punch of his own that connected with the gambler's jaw. The man went down on his back in front of the reception desk.

"Gentlemen. Stop this." The clerk pounded on the bell. The bellman came running from his station. "I'll have to ask you both to leave."

"I'm a guest here." Rowdy dusted his hands over DeCamp's prone body. "This man accosted me in your lobby. I demand that you throw him out into the street." He looked at Cheviot. "Want to make something of it?"

"Never." The viscount strode out the door.

The desk clerk pounded again on the bell. The uniformed doorman stuck out his head. At the sight of the prone man, he rushed to assist him.

DeCamp pushed himself up on his elbows. "Arrest him," he demanded. "He attacked me. He's a troublemaker. I'll press charges."

"He threw the first punch," Rowdy reminded them. "You all saw it."

"He owes—"

Despite the disturbing stories he had heard about the tall American, the desk clerk's primary duty was to his guests. He came round the desk and motioned to the others. "I'm sorry, sir." He bent to assist DeCamp. "You'll have to leave."

He held out his hand while the bellman and the doorman clasped the fallen man under the arms and lifted.

"Get out of my way." With a curse DeCamp knocked aside the clerk's helping hand. Once he was upright, he shook himself free of the others. "Get your hands off me. MacPherson, I'm warning you—"

"You really must leave, sir." The clerk signaled to the other employees, who tried to shoulder him out without actually touching him.

At that moment Clarence lost all sense of restraint. He struck at them and tried to push them aside to get at Rowdy. "I want him arrested. He made a deal."

The clerk shrugged. "Remove him."

The bellman and the doorman seized DeCamp's arms. He began to curse and struggled violently. The bellman was an older man, but the doorman was almost six feet tall with broad shoulders and big competent hands. With ease, he gripped DeCamp's wrist and twisted it up behind his back.

The hold pierced DeCamp's rage. His livelihood could be snapped like a dry tree branch. "Don't break it!" he howled. "Let go! Don't break it."

The grip did not relax even a fraction. The bellman took hold of DeCamp's other arm. Together they turned the struggling man around and carried him out. Once on the sidewalk, they shoved him into the street. He fell to his knees and hung there swaying. Laboriously, he brought his arm around to his chest, cradling his right wrist and moaning. "I'll have you all arrested."

Cheviot stood above him, controlled, still. Not a flicker of emotion showed in his face as he beheld his tormentor huddling in the street, his trousers muddy and befouled, muttering curses to himself.

First one, then another carriage rumbled by, their drivers having to steer their horses aside. Finally, DeCamp pushed himself to his feet. His stream of vile language trailed away to an unintelligible mutter and the man began to brush at his clothing. In the process of trying to clean the mud off his knees, he found Cheviot.

"What're you looking at?"

The viscount did not answer. The doorman of the Ritz stood with hunched shoulders just a few feet away.

The gambler stabbed his finger at Cheviot. "You owe me money. I want it now. No more waiting. I have to have it."

The younger man spread his hands wide. "I don't have any money. You know that."

DeCamp came for him, weaving off balance as his shoes slipped on the damp paving stones. The doorman stepped between them. He lifted a silver whistle on a chain around his neck. "One more step, sir, and I'll blow this."

DeCamp halted. "He owes me money."

"That's as may be, but you can't collect it by force in front of the Ritz. We don't allow such things to annoy our patrons. Be off with you. Get a good night's sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

DeCamp shook himself. "I'll have you taken up first thing in the morning for assault."

The doorman put the whistle to his lips.

DeCamp fell back a step. He pointed at Cheviot. "You'll pay, you bastard. I swear, you'll pay." He reeled away down the street.

Quietly, Rowdy opened the door to Gill's bedroom. Only a mound of covers and the sound of slightly hoarse breathing testified to his cousin's presence.

Rowdy closed the door just as quietly and went to his own room. His first act was to check his ammunition and hang his gun over the bedpost near his head. Then he undressed and slipped beneath the covers.

Sleep was a long time coming as he tried to plan the rest of his stay in England. Tomorrow, he would rouse Gill and the two would pay a visit as soon as they could politely do so on Sir Charles Stowers. He wondered if he should send round a messenger and request a meeting.

No. He would walk right in and ask to speak to the man on business. No more of these delays for social reasons while he

spent money like water and made a fool of himself. He had come on an important assignment. From what Duchess had said about the man's going back to look after his cattle, he guessed that Sir Charles would appreciate the direct approach. A further conversation with Daniel Sawyer had confirmed that the man had a well-known herd of Herefords. Perhaps they could reach some agreement and return with the breeder to Upton-on-Severn.

He put his hands behind his head and stared into the darkness. No reason why the deal could not be concluded in one day. Gill could take over the task of arranging for the transportation and shipping. He could return to London to arrange for the transfer of money and convince Duchess to marry him.

At the thought of her, his body tightened. He had been half in love with her from the moment he had seen her. Their lovemaking was an erotic delight. He would not have to go through the unpleasantness of getting rid of Monro Taine if he could convince Duchess to marry him and sail to America.

Just like the horseback riding, Duchess really didn't have much choice. Of course, she might balk at the idea, but she would come to see that his was the best plan for her and that sweet little girl.

Evelyn and Randolph. Duchess and Rowdy. They went together. Mrs. Evelyn MacPherson. His friends and family would be impressed.

He grinned as he remembered Pan's telling him what to say and how to behave. With her on his side, how could he fail?

And how his mother would love her. Far from being daunted at the idea of a ready-made family, he relished the fun he could have showing the pair of them the Lone Star State.

Once more he felt like letting loose with a loud warwhoop. He would do his father proud. He would come home with a herd of fine English cattle and a pair of English roses.

Duchess sat for a long time in the darkness, shivering with reaction to Rowdy's lovemaking. It had been quite the most

wonderful experience of her life, but the consequences were likely to be disastrous.

The fear of pregnancy loomed gigantic in her mind. While illegitimacy was more the rule than the exception in the strata of society from which she had escaped, she knew full well that it was a social taboo in the society where she and Pan now lived. Pan's friends would disappear. She would be asked to withdraw from the school where she was learning so much and was so happy.

Duchess's own hopes of a suitable marriage—entertained in the odd hours when sleep eluded her—would be dashed unless she were willing to live the age-old and convenient lie—widowhood.

She rose with a sigh and lighted the lamp. Wearily, she unfastened her mother's necklace and bracelets. As she unscrewed the earbob, she felt the little tenderness on the lobe where Rowdy had bitten her. She shivered deliciously as the memory.

A glance in the mirror made her glad the house was asleep. Hastily, she removed the beautiful dress, now sadly wrinkled, the stockings and shoes, the silken underwear. The shredded and stained drawers she rolled into a tight ball and thrust into the bottom of her handbag.

She would dispose of them in an alley tomorrow or the next day. She blushed with shame at the thought of Mrs. Nance's finding them and drawing the correct conclusion.

Rowdy MacPherson had seduced her.

And she had welcomed his seduction. He was no more to blame than she, and they were both to blame for giving in to the sins of the flesh. She had only suspected the incredible tide that pulled men and women together. She had never really thought it would sweep *her* away.

Forewarned as she had been from early childhood, she should have been able to resist. But she had not. Her body had behaved with a power of its own.

Once more, she looked at herself in the mirror. A pale nude with dark hair upswept. Eyes huge shining with the daze of ecstasy. She ran her hands down the tops of her thighs. He had

been gentle, and altogether wonderful. Otherwise, she would have been able to see the imprint of his hands.

She shuddered, for she recognized the picture she made. She was one of the nudes on the walls of the Lord's Dream.

Cold. Cold. Cold. The last traces of ecstatic heat vanished dissipated by the arctic blasts of reality and regret. She had become what she despised most. A whore.

What would become of her now?

To whom could she turn?

Cate. Fearsome, foul-mouthed *Cate*. *Cate*, absolutely unshockable. Burdened with a terrible clear-eyed view of the world. Suddenly, she wanted to look at *Cate*, to speak to her, perhaps to touch the awful reality that she represented and that she, *Duchess*, had become. But had she really? If she was the same as *Cate*, she wanted to know that. If not, then the meeting would be a cause for hope.

Mostly she wanted to talk to another woman. Everything that had happened to her—the passion, the physical responses, the aftermath. She wanted to make some sense of it. She wanted to talk to someone who would understand and not think the loss of one's virginity was a tragedy.

Dressed in a prim black walking suit, she banged the brass knocker of the Lord's Dream. Four hours after midnight, in what was actually the morning hours, the place was quiet. The gas flambeaux on either side of the front door had been extinguished. The early customers had gone home. Those who preferred to stay the night were soundly asleep. *Cate* herself might be asleep.

Duchess had to knock three times before she could rouse anyone to answer her. The surly doorman stared at her in disbelief, then started to close the door. She threw her weight against it. "I'm *Duchess*."

"Ain't no Duke 'ere," he growled.

"I'm not looking for a duke. I've come to see *Cate*."

"*Cate*?" He glanced uncertainly over his shoulder. "She's—er—probably asleep."

"Unless she's engaged with a late customer."

He stared at her narrowly, rubbed his eyes, then blinked several times. The man had brought her the message that had led her to her first real meeting with Cate. He squinted, rocking forward on his toes. "I know you."

"So you know to let me come in." She slipped past him and into the salon.

The candles had all guttered out. Their scented waxes had spilled over the edges of their drip pans. The gaslights had been turned low. Curdled and drying, remains of the usual midnight supper awaited servants who arrived at dawn to clear it away.

In the rosy half-light, a man sat on a divan drinking and smoking. The girl he had purchased for the night sat facing him, her arm draped behind him. They were talking softly. He had discarded his coat and vest. His ascot hung over his shoulders. The girl had let down her hair and pulled a feathery wrapper over her elaborate corset and gartered hose. They might have been a married couple enjoying some kind of ordinary evening at home.

Duchess tucked her head to one side to conceal her face and hurried up the stairs. Outside Cate's door she hesitated. Her errand seemed most foolish. She shouldn't be—

Cate burst out of her door and almost collided with her. "What's wrong? What in hell are you doing here?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"Charly rings an alarm from the door downstairs." Cate put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing here?" she asked crossly. "It's the middle of the night."

"Actually, it's almost morning. I came to . . ." Duchess could not go on. She could feel herself crumbling. Tears welled in her eyes. She failed miserably to stifle a sob.

"What's happened, for God's sake?" Cate grasped her half-sister's wrist and pulled her into the room. "Tell me."

Duchess began to shake her head. The movement put her whole body in motion. Her limbs trembled. Her teeth chattered.

Cate pushed her into a chair and poured a glass of brandy. "Here. Drink this."

"I don't think I should." Duchess's words came out punctuated by a snuffle as she tried to control the tears.

"Even a goody-goody like you can handle one drink," Cate sneered. "And if you get drunk, I'll send you home with Charly. He knows where you live." She thrust the glass into Duchess's shaking hand. "Now. Drink up."

Obediently, Duchess took a sip. She swallowed, then stared at the brown liquid too embarrassed to speak, still shaking from head to toe. Fervently, she wished she had not come. This was none of Cate's business. No one's business really except her own and Rowdy's.

The silence grew in the room. Then in an uncharacteristic movement, Cate went down on her knees to cover Duchess's hands around the glass and to look up into her face. "Someone got to you, didn't he?"

Bright blood rushed into Duchess's cheeks. She bit her lip.

Cate steered the glass up. "Drink a little more. No, don't turn your head away, damn it. You've had a shock to your system. Did he hurt you? Are you bruised? broken? bleeding?"

To each question Duchess gave a tiny shake of her head.

"You're all right?"

"Yes." The word was a breath of air dispelled on a sob.

Cate rose and stalked away. For the first time Duchess realized that Cate was not dressed in black net and lace. Instead, she wore a long cotton nightgown that covered her from neck to ankles. Her short curly black hair left her slender neck bare. She looked like a child.

Her mirthless laugh, reduced to a baritone by tobacco and alcohol, dispelled the childlike image. She plucked a cigarette from a box and lit it. "So what did you come to me for? Permission?"

The brandy had steadied Duchess enough so she had stopped crying. "No."

"Approval, then? How was it? Did you enjoy it?"

"Please." The questions were embarrassing in the extreme.

The old haughty Cate swung around. The skirt of the sedate gown belled out. She blew a cloud of white smoke toward the ceiling. "What did you come for?"

"I'll go." Duchess set the half-finished drink on the table and tried to rise.

"Sit down, for God's sake. Whatever you came for, you were right to come here." Cate's voice gentled.

To her amazement Duchess found her legs so weak that they dropped her back onto the chair.

"Shall I ring for some supper?" Cate asked not unkindly.

"No."

The two girls stared at each other. Then Cate stooped and turned a handle on the steam radiator. It hissed, then knocked and banged. "All the comforts," she mused to herself. "Love these things. Remember when everything was hot coals and nasty ashes."

Duchess nodded.

"The gaslights are wonderful too. No more kerosene or smelly whale oil to carry around. I've heard Baal over at the Devil's Palace has the electric lights. He had a fire with the gas and almost didn't get out alive. The next thing will be electric lights for me."

"I think for me too," Duchess agreed. She was becoming calmer.

Cate rose and rubbed her arms through the cotton fabric. "Do you have radiators at your place?"

"Yes."

Cate pulled a chair close to Duchess and crossed her legs. "Tell me all about it."

Duchess hoped her voice would not quiver. "I couldn't seem to help myself."

Cate rolled her eyes. "Oh, Lord. One of those."

The heated blush rose in Duchess's cheeks. "My mind kept screaming 'stop.'"

"And your belly kept screaming 'go, go.'" Cate laughed. "Happens all the time, darlin', to better women than you. Just proves you're human."

"But I had the most awful feelings. I know nice women don't have those feelings."

"Piss on nice women. Piss on good women. And especially piss on virtuous women." Cate blew another cloud of smoke

into the air and allowed her voice to slide up and down the scale on the word "virtuous." "Remember what I said, 'The Colonel's Lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin.'"

Duchess blushed. At last she understood what the poet meant.

Cate smiled at the blush. "Do you want to do it again?"

Then the color really flamed in Duchess's cheeks. She had to nod.

Cate grinned. "So he was a wonderful lover."

Duchess bowed her head. "Yes, I suppose so. He must have been."

Cate patted her half-sister's knee. "Want to know what makes a nice woman?"

"I suppose so."

"It's some poor female who's been hurt so badly the first time that she never wants to have anything to do with it again."

Duchess shuddered. "It did hurt some, but—"

"He was considerate and careful and kind. Spare me. I've heard it all before," Cate finished the sentence for her. "But many men are not considerate nor kind nor careful. They're ignorant and selfish. They're a bit afraid that they won't be masculine enough. And they're puffed up with their own rights. So they throw their sixteen- or seventeen-year-old bride down on her back and rip her apart without even a 'by your leave' or a 'thank you, ma'am.'"

"If she's lucky, she gets pregnant the first lay and then he leaves her alone. So she becomes a nice woman. She doesn't want him to come near her. Not because she's so good and moral and Christian and all that crap, but because she's been half killed by him, and she's afraid he'll finish the job."

She waited for all of this to soak in on Duchess. "And she'll never know one of the truly great pleasures of this wretched existence. When it's done right."

Then she touched her fingers to Duchess's cheek and lifted her face until their eyes met. "If you want him to do it again, then you'll never be a nice woman, but believe me, you're a lucky one."

Duchess put her hand around Cate's wrist. She was still shivering, but she could feel her control returning.

Cate looked uncertainly at the hand of gratitude. Her mouth twisted. She jerked away and rose. Like a tigress she began her stalking again, back and forth, talking as she went. "But that doesn't mean you're going to have to make your living here. That's what you're worried about, isn't it? Came here to find out, didn't you? Do you think you want to make love to just anybody?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, then, there you are. You're attracted to this one man. You won't fall down and spread your legs for anything in pants. Trust me. It doesn't work that way. If it did, we'd be stepping over bodies in the streets."

Duchess blushed again at the picture.

Cate lighted another cigarette off the first. Her mouth twisted cynically. "Why do I feel like your mother? God!" She stalked the length of the room and back. "Do you think he wants to make love to you again?"

Duchess faltered again. "Oh, no. I'm sure he wouldn't. He's—ah—had his way with me . . ."

"Oh, for God's sake! Use your eyes. You saw that man sitting downstairs. What do you think he was doing? He likes that girl. He probably loves her. If he had any sense, he'd dump the silly goose he got stuck with twenty years ago when his mama and papa told him who to marry."

"But—she's—"

"Times are changing. Mark my words—when that old bag in the palace turns up her toes and the new century comes in, things will be different. As it is, the Lord's Dream has turned into a bloody revolving door since Lady H retired. The girls meet men. I train them to be friendly and accommodating. I tell them they have to listen to their johns. And the men feel like kings. They can't wait to set them up. Who am I to stand in their way?"

"You're saying . . ." Duchess could feel her eyes stinging. Cate had given her a ray of hope. She clutched it to her.

"Unless your lover's an absolute fool, he'll recognize what he has. Or what's he's had. He'll be back. It's up to you to decide whether you want him or not."

Duchess leaned back in her chair. She should never have drunk the brandy, given her condition. She had been up and moving through a whirlwind of emotions for almost twenty-four hours. A terrible exhaustion was stealing over her. Her limbs felt leaden. Cate's words had reassured her and frightened her. What if Cate was right? What if Rowdy would be back? "He's an American."

"So?" Cate shrugged. "Is he a savage? A red Indian?"

"Oh, no. He's tall and handsome and very rich. He's from a shire called Texas, where they have ranches. He's here to buy cattle."

"Tall and handsome are good things," Cate agreed, "but rich is better."

"He comes from a very good family."

"What difference does that make? You come from a very good family." Cate jerked her head in the direction of the front of the house where Montague slept. "Of course, they've fallen onto hard times now. But your blood is as blue as anybody's. You can go to America with him."

"Leave London. Oh, I couldn't."

"Why not? Do you just love 'merrie olde Anglelonde' so much that you can't bear to leave her?" Cate flung herself on the chaise and blew a stream of smoke to the ceiling. "If I had the chance, I'd take it in a minute."

The admission startled Duchess. "Would you really?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I've got a good thing going here. Lady H has washed her hands of the place. She's living for the Stock Exchange. And the ways she's going, she'll die rich as any lord. And I'll inherit."

With her habitual nervousness, Cate flung herself off the chaise and stalked to her desk. Reaching behind it, she pulled a key from a hiding place. She opened a drawer and drew out a box. Grinning from ear to ear, she clicked it open under Duchess's nose.

A magnificent necklace sparkled like fire in the gaslights. "Diamonds," she crooned. "Diamonds set in platinum. And no damned man bought them for me. I bought them for myself."

She tossed the necklace into Duchess's lap. "But you'll never

have that if you stay here." She caught the other's chin and lifted it. "You'll wake up with a thundering headache in some crib in Germany or meet with a dreadful accident as soon as Monro Taine can find someone smart enough to pull off the job."

Duchess shivered again. "What am I going to do? Suddenly, it's all too much."

Cate squeezed her shoulder comfortingly. "Do the best thing for everyone concerned. Especially you."

"But I don't know what to do," Duchess whispered.

"You'll figure it out. I'll bet even money that, when the time comes, you won't have any choice."

Clarence DeCamp looked over his shoulder. He was right. A man ducked back into the doorway of a building in the next block. He was being followed. Fearfully, he hailed a cab. As it rolled by, he caught a glimpse of his shadower. The Egyptian.

He had no money. None at all. But he still had two days. He directed the driver to the Audley townhouse. Cheviot would be there. *Damn the little rat!*

The residence was richly decorated. Paintings, plate, antiquities from the Egyptian campaign against Napoleon. DeCamp's lips curved back in a snarl. Francis's "dear pater" had bragged at length that his own father had sent the stuff home by the shipload.

Many things there would fetch a pretty price, enough to pay Monro Taine and leave him a cushion.

The cab halted before the fashionable Mayfair residence. The gambler sprang down, telling the driver to wait. Revitalized by his plans, he banged the knocker and rang the bell with equal vigor. Then he stood shifting from one foot to the other, his anger building. Finally, from within the house, he heard a shuffling, a bar moved, a lock turned.

"Yes."

He pushed the door back into the elderly butler and strode rudely past him. "I need to see the viscount."

"Here now, Mr. DeCamp." Befuddled with sleep, the man

made a bad job of gathering his robe together and intercepting the visitor at the same time. "You can't burst into the house in the middle of the night."

"I'm in," DeCamp sneered. If he remembered correctly, the dining room with its sterling candelabra was to the right, the reception room with its gilded basalt sphinx was to the left. "Fetch your master."

"I'll do no such thing," the butler argued stanchly. He had tied his robe tightly across his portly middle and assumed his haughty mien. He held the door wide. "The young master is asleep. The old master is in Italy. You can have no business with either of them tonight. Leave now."

"Close the door and go get 'em," the gambler ordered. "Otherwise, I'll start yelling."

"Get out."

"I'll yell!" He opened his mouth.

The butler shut the door and waved his hands ineffectually. "Be quiet. You'll wake the entire neighborhood."

DeCamp lowered his voice and spoke in his most persuasive manner. "Look, my good man, I'm drunk. As you can see. Humor me. Get him down here. You'll save us all a bit of time and trouble."

The butler looked at the intruder. The odor of tobacco wafted from the man's clothing as well as a faint hint of spirits. Perhaps he really was drunk. "Stay right where you are," he warned.

When he had disappeared up the stairs, DeCamp darted into the dining room. Flinging off his cloak, he tossed it onto the table. Setting his foot against the silver chest, he broke the first delicate drawer lock. It was the work of seconds to dump its contents and then the next and the next. Five drawers of sterling silverware were almost more than he could lug with him. He tied the corners of his cloak together. They would fetch at least part of the money. He could hold Taine off with that.

Leaving both the dining room door and the front door open, he hurried out to the waiting hack and climbed in.

The vehicle had disappeared when the butler and Cheviot discovered the theft.

* * *

The Viscount ordered a bottle of brandy be brought. When it was done and the first fiery draught had slid down his throat, he dismissed the old butler to his rest. Another swallow. He shuddered as he contemplated to ruin of the piece of furniture. Ordinarily, he would not have cared. It was pieces of wood and brass and felt and the craftsmanship that brought them all together in a perfect harmony. Now he saw in their destruction the oncoming destruction of his life.

Never mind that he could get the silver back after some minor inconvenience. The silver was not the thing, nor the chest for all that.

He had let the destroyer into his life. He had fallen into the hands of an evil that would quickly and soon smash his life as it had smashed that piece of furniture. The centuries old name, the pride of his father would be smashed. Unless he acted.

He took another swallow of brandy. And act he must. He shuddered. He couldn't face this evil and drive it away. It would laugh. It would come at him and tear him to pieces. He stared at the disemboweled chest. The drawers lay scattered about where they had been tossed when they were empty of their contents. From beneath one of the tines of a fork glinted dully.

Cheviot bent and retrieved the piece. He held it to the light. His eyes counted the three slender daggers of almost solid silver. He closed his fist around the handle. Tears came to his eyes. Beauty and heritage lost.

No more! He put the stopper on the decanter. No more until he rid himself of the monster as soon as possible by whatever means at hand.

Chapter Sixteen

Just like Buffalo Bill

"I've got to speak to Duchess before we go," Rowdy announced, stooping to brush his hair. The mirror anchored on the wall was much too low for a man of his height.

One of Gill's black eyebrows quirked upward. He tilted his handsome head to one side, studying his cousin. "She might not appreciate getting waked out of a sound sleep. Besides, if we're going to catch the early train to Bristol and then take a coach to Upton-on-Severn, we don't have any time to be saying goodbye."

"I'm not saying goodbye. Just 'so long and I'll be seeing you.' I don't want to go away without speaking to her." Rowdy's expression turned mulish.

Still Gill objected. "We'll spend half the day traveling as it is. Send her a note. If we go now, we'll be back tomorrow evening. You'll have time to romance her while we're handling the details for the shipment."

The word "romance" made Rowdy flush. He glared at his cousin. "Listen . . ."

Ordinarily easygoing, Gill became insistent. Memories of the Old Bailey still troubled his dreams. "No, you listen, Rowdy. Please. We've got just over half an hour to make the train. We'll be running as it is. I don't want to stay in this country

one day longer than I have to. When I step off the boat in Galveston, I'm going to fall on my knees and kiss the ground and swear never to leave it again."

Torn between sympathy for his cousin and concern for Duchess, Rowdy allowed his cousin to put his hat on his head and lead him down into the lobby. They had passed the key to the desk clerk and were turning away when the doorman opened the door for Detective Inspector Clive Revill.

Gill stiffened in trepidation. Cell doors swung shut like shadows in his mind. He sucked in his breath as his stomach gave a lurch.

Rowdy watched the color drain from his cousin's face. His own anger kindled. *Enough was enough, by God.* He shot a furious glare at the approaching detective.

Revill's face was sad, his eyes world-weary. With a wave of his hand, he directed them toward the alcove where he had arrested Gill.

Instead of going quietly, Rowdy MacPherson flung his hat onto polished marble floor of the hotel lobby and stomped his boot beside it. "God Almighty, Revill! Haven't you given Gill enough grief?"

The outburst drew the attention of every patron in the lobby and set the desk clerk to pounding on his bell.

"Easy, Rowdy." Gill stooped and retrieved the hat. He smiled placatingly at the frowning manager who came on the run. "He just lost his temper. He does that sometimes. He'll be all right." Replacing Rowdy's hat, he steered his cousin into the alcove.

"Well, gentlemen, you seem to have created quite a stir everywhere you've gone," Revill began.

Rowdy clamped his lips tight to contain his anger. He had to take a couple of deep breaths before he had recovered himself sufficiently to answer the policeman. "We didn't ask for trouble," he said at last. "It just seemed to find us."

Revill nodded. He pulled out his little notebook and thumbed through it, in search of the proper page. Rowdy and Gill exchanged a here-we-go-again look. Gill pulled his watch from his pocket and shook his head.

Revill caught the gesture. "Going somewhere?"

"To Montmarch. Outside of Upton-on-Severn," Rowdy answered. "We're going to miss our train if you don't make this snappy. We're expected by Sir Charles Stowers," he continued. "We're out to buy some of his prize Herefords and then we're going to shake the dust of this damned country off our boots forever."

Revill nodded. "Leaving no unfinished business behind you?"

Gill shook his head. "You have my word. Until that business is cleared up—"

"I'm not concerned about that charge. For the record I haven't heard any more about that charge." Revill consulted his notebook again. From under his brows he stared at the two young men.

Irritated almost to the point of another explosion, Rowdy pushed his coat aside and hooked his thumbs over his belt. "Maybe you'd better tell us what you came about."

Revill withdrew his stubby pencil from the spine of the notebook. He used it to mark his place. "I have a report of a disturbance in your hotel room. I believe the report was lodged by one Mr. Clarence DeCamp. He claims you drew a gun on him."

"He came in threatening me." Rowdy hunched his shoulders. His stance became more belligerent. "I was defending myself."

"According to Mr. DeCamp's deposition, he feared for his life. He states here that hotel employees witnessed the threat to his person and can be called as corroborating witnesses."

Gill sank down in the chair and pressed his hand against his temple. Rowdy shook his head. "If you came here to arrest me for that, I'll just do him one better. I'll swear that he and Lord Cheviot broke into my room. I was lying in my bed having some tea. They came busting in and outnumbered me. The guy who was bringing my breakfast will testify that I was alone."

Revill looked even sadder. "You haven't had a pleasant stay in our city, have you, Mr. MacPherson?"

"You can say that again."

Revill consulted his notebook again. "Likewise, I have a report of a fight between Mr. DeCamp and you in the lobby

two nights ago. This was reported not by him, but by the night manager."

Rowdy spun around and kicked the leg of an unoffending chair. "Damn!" He spun back and thrust his face into Revill's. "It was the same damn thing." Every word was spaced for emphasis. "He thinks he's going to get me to buy his friend's cattle, which aren't worth the powder to blow 'em up with."

"It has likewise been reported to me that you keep a gun on the bedstead here in the hotel." Revill turned the page in the notebook. "And that you have buckled the gunbelt on and ridden through the streets."

"It's my gun," Rowdy defended. "I got attacked on the streets one night last week. Cut up some."

"Indeed," Revill looked at the towering body rocking on high-heeled boots. He could see no sign of any injury, but that did not mean that one had not been done. Privately, he suspected that if an injury had been done to Randolph MacPherson, he had given at least as good as he got. "And did you report this to the police?"

Rowdy shook his head. Too late he realized he should have done so. A report would have counteracted all these other reports that people were filing against him. Unfortunately, he had been too angry—and then too happy with Duchess. And events had moved too swiftly. Mentally, he cursed this land and all its people—except Duchess. One more week and they would be gone. At that moment he made up his mind to take her with him. People were crazy here. She would not be safe. He would kidnap her if he had to.

Revill watched the cousins carefully. Unless they were actors ranking with the best that Drury Lane had to offer, they were at a loss as to where his questions were leading. MacPherson had made no effort to deny any of the reports of his behavior. Certainly, all these incidents were no worse than the drunken and disorderly hijinks of peers of the realm. Unfortunately, the circumstantial evidence was very strong. He turned to a new page in his notebook. "Where were you two last night?"

Rowdy shifted his weight and lifted his chin. "Why don't you just stop all this pussyfooting around and tell us what

you've come for?" he growled. "We can answer questions all day and you're not going to get anything out of us 'cause we haven't done anything."

"If you haven't," Revill said softly, "you will have ample opportunity to prove it. I'm telling you, Randolph MacPherson, not to leave town, nor to make any effort to leave the country. The Honorable Clarence DeCamp was found murdered this morning. Shot in the back."

"The hell you say." Rowdy exchanged an amazed look with Gill.

"I must tell you that you seem the prime suspect since we have records of your quarrels. Statements will be taken from all the witnesses as well as from yourselves. As Scotland Yard makes its investigation, we hope you will be cooperative."

Back in their room, they sank into opposite chairs and stared at each other glumly.

Gill could feel his stomach roiling. He had to keep swallowing to keep from vomiting. He had never in his life wanted a drink, until that minute. "What in hell are we going to do?"

Rowdy rubbed knuckles against his forehead. "Give me a minute. I'm thinking."

"Well, think fast." Gill rubbed his sweaty palms against his trousers. I'm for sneaking out of the hotel and taking the boat-train for France."

Rowdy sprang to his feet. Like a lobo he began to prowl the room, his bootheels thudded rhythmically. "No. Goshdarnit. No. I'm not going home with my tail between my legs. I'm going to bring home the Herefords that my papa sent me to buy. Otherwise, I've spent a lot of hard-earned money for nothing and my brothers will never let me live it down. I've made a fool of myself and gotten us into all kinds of trouble, but I'll be damned if they'll make me run."

"He told us not to leave town." Gill laced his fingers together between his knees and stared glumly at the carpet pattern. "We can't buy Herefords from a hotel suite."

Rowdy paused in his pacing to push aside the curtain. "I

imagine he's got a man watching the hotel too. In fact, that's him right there, unless I'm very much mistaken." His mouth curled at the corners. He snapped his fingers. "We're going to buy those Herefords, just like we planned."

"You're kidding."

Rowdy shook his head. He reached for his gunbelt. "Here's what we're going to do."

"Rowdy!" Gill sprang to his feet. His cousin must have been losing his mind with anger and frustration if he was fastening on his sixgun. "You can't put that thing on."

"No law against it that I ever heard of. I'm just protecting myself. Somebody in this town is out to get me. I've already told Revill that."

"But won't that make the case against you stronger if you show yourself with your gun on?"

Rowdy drew the gun and spun the cylinder. "If Revill could prove anything, he would have arrested me. This deal today was just to scare us. He was hoping to catch us off guard and get a confession."

Gill grinned. "Of course, *primo hermano*. But he didn't get a confession because we didn't know what he was talking about."

"Exactly."

"But who killed DeCamp?"

"Who cares?" Rowdy holstered the gun. "Not us. More than likely some poor sucker he'd cheated put a slug in him."

"You're going to end up in the Old Bailey yourself," Gill protested.

Rowdy pulled his cousin to the window and pointed to the uniformed policeman standing across the street. The man clearly had no intention of moving since he had pulled out a pocket knife and was scraping it around underneath his fingernails. "I'm going down there and call for a horse. I'll take a ride and lead this guy on a wild-goose chase."

Gill's grin widened. "While I get on the train for Montmarch and the Herefords."

"Right."

Gill sobered. "I'm sorry, Rowdy. You really wanted to pick those cattle yourself."

A shadow flickered in Rowdy's eyes. Then he clapped his cousin on the back. "You'll probably do a better job. Give me ten minutes. Watch the street. When that fella moves out after me, come out through the front door."

"Not the side?"

"They've probably got someone on guard there too. I'll make sure I leave real fast so he doesn't have time to tell the other."

Rowdy hooked his frock coat open over the handle of his pistol, answering Gill's stare with a mocking grin. He set his hat on his head and ran his hand along the curve of the brim. "Hell, Gill, this is going to be fun."

Gill shut the door after him and walked to the window. "*Vaya con Dios, primo hermano.*"

Under the nervous stares of the manager, the desk clerk, the bellman, and several guests, Rowdy lounged near the door until he heard the clop of hooves in the street outside. A quick look out the door confirmed that a liveryman had brought up the big dapple gray gelding he had ridden the day before. He nodded his satisfaction. The horse was strong and fast. Furthermore, he would attract plenty of attention.

Rowdy faced the room and swept off his hat. Bowing audaciously, he flashed an impudent grin. A draft of fresh air signaled that the doorman had opened the door. Rowdy replaced his hat and bolted. His coattails flapped behind him as he sprang onto the English pancake saddle without touching the irons.

"Here now!" the liveryman exclaimed.

The gray whinnied and reared as Rowdy jerked the reins from the man's hands and pulled the horse's head up.

"*Eeee-haw!*"

The policeman's eyes bugged at the sight of the Texan astride the rearing horse. As the animal came down, its rider pulled its head around. Clapping spurs to its flanks, he sent the gray galloping out of the hotel drive and down the street.

The policeman dashed after him, but his speed was no match

for the fresh horse. Two blocks and it was flying down the street, pale mane and tail streaming, with Rowdy MacPherson leaning forward and urging it on with hands and heels and voice.

Through the throng of onlookers that had gathered in front of the hotel, Gill Sandoval passed, walking unnoticed into the next street, where he hailed a cab and was borne away to Euston Street Station.

Rowdy assumed a nonchalant pose on the stoop of Duchess's house. When she finally opened the door, he had draped one hand over the bone handle of his gun. With the other he swept his Stetson to his heart. "Care to come steppin' out with a murderer?"

"What?"

He pulled a long face. "Remember that Revill fellow?"

"Detective Inspector Clive Revill. Yes." She reached out and caught Rowdy by the wrist.

"He came by the hotel today and told me not to leave town. Seems I'm the number one suspect in the murder of the Dishonorable Clarence DeCamp."

Duchess pulled him in and looked both ways in the street before she slammed the door behind him.

"Thank you, ma'am." Once inside he hung his hat on the halltree. As she turned, he swept her up in his arms and kissed her. The second their lips met, a spark ignited. From a half-joking mischievous salute, the kiss became a thing of passion.

To his delight, his hands found that she was in a wrapper and nightgown. He was hard as stone in the next instant, his body fueled by his imagination and the warm softness he held against him.

Panting, he pushed her back against the wall, while she sank her fingers into his hair and angled his head to kiss him more deeply. He threw her skirts up. His long fingers slid through the moist heat.

She bit his tongue.

His thumb found the throbbing nerves beneath her silky hair. Two of his long fingers slid into her.

She whimpered.

The small sound was enough to slow him. He tore his mouth away and sucked in a deep breath. "What? What? Are you sore?"

She gasped for breath. "I . . . yes . . . but it's all right."

He pulled his hand away and let her skirts fall. "No. It's not."

Shaking, he stepped back until he leaned against the other side of the hall, facing her, his hands trembling, breathing as if he had run a race. He closed his eyes, then opened them. Through slits, he watched her gasping, her head thrown back against the wall, her throat bare, the white skin between her breasts—

He squinched his eyes tight and tried to pull his mind into safer channels.

After a minute, she pulled her wrapper together at her throat. "Let's go into the sitting room."

Twitching her skirts aside, she led the way.

From his angle of vision, her wrapper and gown swayed enticingly. The long skein of dark hair swung loose, its ends curling softly below her waist. He could imagine how silky it would feel when he plunged his hands into it. He even loved her trim ankles and her little bare feet. Voice hoarse, he murmured. "I apologize, Evelyn. Most sincerely. I've gotten you out of bed, haven't I?"

She looked back at him, a blush rising in her cheeks. The formal name steadied her. Her blood began to cool. "You have indeed, Randolph, but that's all right. I don't mind."

Once in the parlor, she motioned him to a seat. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Rowdy wondered if he dared stretch his legs out in front of him. He was still excited, but the terrible throbbing had subsided. He decided instead to cross his legs and lean back. Sober thoughts cooled him. "Damned if I know. Seems the fellow was shot." He dropped his hand onto his gun butt. "Since I'm

the only enemy he's got, so the police think, and I'm the only one in all of England with a gun, so I'm the murderer."

Duchess bit her lip. A frown creased her forehead. She remembered well the scene in the hotel room. The threats exchanged. The viscount as well as the waiter had both seen and heard.

Rowdy watched her expression darken, watched her eyes slide to the gun, then away. It hurt him. Somehow, he had expected her to be on his side. A heartfelt curse sprang from his lips. He leaped to his feet. "I'll be leaving, ma'am. Sorry I disturbed your rest."

"Wait." She sprang up too and caught his arm.

"No reason to. You think I did it. That's that."

"No. Don't be silly. I know you didn't do it. After all, you were with me."

A slow red rose in his cheeks. She had made him blush.

"Besides why would you kill him? You've gotten your friend out of jail. You had found another place to purchase your cattle. I hardly know you, but I'll bet you don't hold grudges. Do you?" She looked up at him inquiringly.

"Hell, no." He was smiling now. His red hair was tousled from her frantic passion. Her fingers itched to smooth it back. His eyes were wide and innocent pools of blue. He was the handsomest man she had ever seen. Moverover, he was what he said. He knew no other way to be. "Back in Texas this thing would have been over and done with on a Saturday night and we'd have been friends again on Sunday morning."

Smiling and nodding, she went on making her case. "Even though he hurt you, you weren't really upset. He wasn't anything but a minor annoyance. Another week and you'll be gone. Why would you have gone to the trouble to kill him?"

She searched his face, gauging the effect of her words. Both hands encircled his arm and drew him back to the chair. "Just sit down and let's think about this."

His smile was a light. His lashes swept down, concealing something of his expression. "How about marrying me and fighting my battles for the rest of my life?"

She waited a second too long before she laughed. "Don't be ridiculous. We need to plan." She began to bundle up her hair.

"Leave it down." He towered over her and tried to put his arms around her waist.

"No." She caught his wrists and stepped neatly away. Her voice quivered just a little before the intensity in his eyes and the response of her own senses to his powerful maleness. Suddenly, he filled the room. Space which had never seemed small before seemed smothering. "Now just stop that. I'm an English woman and you're an American man. A few more days and we'll never see each other again."

He threw up his hands with a rueful chuckle. "Have it your way for now. Just remember—a few more days and I could be in an English jail for the rest of my life." He sank into a chair and tilted his head to one side in imitation of a loyal puppy. "Would you come and visit me on weekends, Duchess?"

Back on firmer ground, she sat down in front of him. "It won't come to that. I'm sure. But we have to figure out who did this before important members of Parliament bring pressure on Revill to bring his most likely suspect in for questioning."

Rowdy shrugged. "I don't figure he can do that. If he could have, he already would have. So Gill and I already made a plan."

"Which is?"

"I'm going to lead the police on a wild-goose chase today and tomorrow. He's already on the way to Herefordshire to buy those cattle from Stowers. When he comes back, we'll make arrangements to ship them. Once they're loaded, I'll probably lead the policeman off again while Gill sails with the cattle. Then I'll escape and the hell with them all."

"You might find it harder than you think to escape," she warned him.

He raised one dark red eyebrow. "Not if you know how the Texas critters do it."

"Texas critters."

"Sure. Horned toads. Coyotes. Possums. Jackrabbits."

Her lips moved as she tested the strange names. If nothing

else, he would leave her with an infinitely richer vocabulary. "How do they hide?"

"In plain sight. They've got the color of the Texas earth. When danger gets too close, they hide right before your eyes. They freeze until you pass them by and then they move off quietlike."

She shook her head. "But you've run."

"No, ma'am. Me run!" He looked affronted that she might think he was somehow cowardly. "I just did that to give Gill a chance to move off quietlike. Tonight you and me are going to hide in plain sight."

"How do I fit in to all this?"

"I thought you could put on that pretty dress you wore last night and we'd go to dinner and to a play." His pleasure was obvious as he shot his cuffs and tucked his hands behind his head with a what-do-you-think-about-that attitude.

She looked at him in amazement. "I don't see how—"

"Think about it. We'll be right out in plain sight. It'll drive them crazy. Right now they've lost me. They're running around like chickens with their heads cut off. I'll hang around here for a while—if that's all right with you, ma'am . . ."

"Yes. All right." She touched her disordered hair again, praying that Mrs. Nance would not come in and find her in such a state. The thought unsettled her and made her blush fiery red. Not only her feet were bare. She stirred nervously at the thought of her naked limbs. She curled her toes back, feeling the chill of the floor. Just a layer of wool and one of cotton separated her from him. She crossed her arms over her bosom, which suddenly blossomed huge in her mind.

He blushed too. "Er—ma'am . . ."

"Of course, Mr. MacPherson."

"Rowdy."

"Perhaps not. Not Rowdy now. I think you must be Randolph."

He straightened instantly, pulling his legs back under him and placing his hand on the armrest. "And you be Evelyn. Good idea."

She faked serenity as she rose. "If you'll excuse me, Ran-

dolph, I'll just make myself presentable." Her words were spoken in an exaggerated British accent. "Here's the latest copy of the *The Times*. Perhaps you can find mention of the murder in that."

He took the paper but did not glance at it. Instead, his eyes flowed over her body like warm water. "You look just fine to me, Duchess."

She all but melted at the tone of his voice. It sent shivers up her spine and set the warmth to curling in her belly. *Oh, no. Oh no. Just give me the strength.*

He rose slowly, up and up and up. His big hands went round her waist, the thumbs touching in front, the third fingers overlapping in back. She shivered in his grasp but did not pull away. She had no strength to do so. Instead she dropped her head against his chest to hide her blushes. Even as she tried to resist, his lips touched the top of her head.

The kiss in such an unexpected place sent a second fountain of shivers flowing from the spot, prickling every hair on her head, sliding like a shockwave along the nerves of her neck. She moaned faintly and hunched her shoulders.

"Duchess?" he whispered.

"Oh, don't," she pleaded.

"Don't?" She could hear a tinge of laughter in her voice. "Can't I even hold my girl and give her a little-bitty kiss about like an old uncle would?"

Her forehead moved back and forth against his breastbone. "Nothing about you is like an old uncle."

"Well, maybe a young uncle." He moved to her temple, touching his lips to her skin, amazed that he could feel the pulse beat in the blue vein.

"Rowdy. Randolph," she whispered. "We can't do this here. Mrs. Nance will be back at any moment."

"I can't help myself, Duchess. Evelyn." He trailed kisses down her cheek. "I promise if I hear a sound, I'll stop."

Somehow her head had tipped back and now her face felt his light, soft lips. She shook her head faintly. The skein of hair swung heavily, languorously, weighing her down, holding

her to receive the homage of his lips. He had such soft lips. He really was a gentle person. A gentleman.

A seductive, sensual, sexual gentle man. A voice remarkably like Cate's splashed reality in her mind. Cate had been right. He had come back with the same things in mind. *Hang around here awhile indeed.*

"Rowdy!" She doubled one weak fist and punched at his shoulder. The blow meant no more to him than a love pat.

"Duchess." The ss's hissed between her open lips to be followed by his tongue. His mouth closed down over the whole and his arms closed round her, lifting her off her feet and against him. She could feel his arousal against her. She did not fear. She wanted it as Cate had said she would.

After long minutes during which the sound of their breathing filled the room, she managed to pull her mouth away from his. "You really are a savage," she accused. "I think you came here with this in mind."

He was breathing hard, his eyes shining with passion, his big chest pumping in and out against her breasts. "Swear to God," he murmured, "this all came up on the spur of the moment."

Somehow they had moved until she was prone of the fainting couch before the window and he was stretched full length beside her. He had pulled her skirt up and his big hand was hot and questing on the top of her thigh. From somewhere she had found the temerity to press her palm against the arousal that thrust against his trousers. He had almost jumped off the couch when she had done so, but now he had started a trembling of his own that was vastly satisfying to her. She had some power over him, she realized.

She brought her free hand up to cup it behind his head and pull his mouth down to hers when the front door opened downstairs.

"Hello, there." Mrs. Nance's cheery voice rang up the stairs. "Does that horse out front belong to that nice Mr. MacPherson?"

Rowdy toppled back off the chaise and landed with a great knocking and bumping of boot heels and leather holster, not to speak of more than two hundred twenty pounds of hard-

muscle body. Blushing to the roots of her hair and trembling in every limb, Duchess threw herself off the couch on the other side and dashed into her bedroom.

By the time Mrs. Nance had trotted upstairs with an expectant smile on her face, Rowdy was in a chair with *The Times* strategically arranged over his front. He managed a cordial nod of greeting.

Chief Inspector Reginald Townshend was seriously displeased. An occasional murder among the lower classes was no cause for alarm or concern. Upon investigation it generally proved to be some drunken husband or lover who had abused his woman by beating or cutting until she died. *The Times* said little about it and people who read the newspaper deemed it the natural bent of poor people, who were known to be closer to beasts than their betters.

On the other hand, the shooting in the back of the youngest son of a peer was front-page stuff.

Townshend's desk was covered with reports and papers all pertaining to Sandoval and MacPherson. He caught up a handful and waved it under his detective inspector's nose. "Revill, what the hell is going on? These two Americans have been nothing but trouble. We had one under lock and key. He was released. Now they've murdered a member of society."

Revill could feel his ears reddening. He assumed his weary stance. This part of the job had to be got through with as much stoicism as he could muster. "Chief Inspector, Guillermo Sandoval was let go because the charges against him were so minor and because the American consul intervened. According to him, these men are prominent members of American society."

In the evening of the second day since DeCamp's death, the press had sold a great many papers based upon speculation. A drawing of MacPherson galloping down the street with gun drawn and coattails flapping had appeared on the front page of *The Times* with the caption "Wild West Gunfighter." On an inside page another drawing depicted a man clutching his

chest. The muzzle of a gun protruded from behind a curtain near him.

Since Clarence DeCamp had been found shot dead on a dark street in Soho, the picture bore no reasonable connection to the actual event, but the readers had put the two together.

"Arrest the man," Townshend instructed. "We'll send a message to all foreigners that they can't come here and harm British citizens."

"Begging your pardon, Chief Inspector. I'd like to finish gathering evidence before I make any arrests." Revill pulled his notebook from his coat pocket, even though he knew everything in it. He shuffled through the pages, read one or two, then closed it. "The fact is that we have nothing to connect the one with the other apart from the fact that they had quarreled."

"Well, there you are."

"No, sir. DeCamp was known to have quarreled with a lot of people. Including some particularly nasty individuals."

"Such as?"

Revill leaned forward, placing his hands on the edge of the desk. "Monro Taine."

Townshend frowned. His eyes dropped to the files. He began to thumb through them. "I don't see that noted here."

"Not yet, sir." Revill straightened. "But we've got men working on it."

Townshend cleared his throat. "I'm getting quite a few inquiries from important people. They want this thing taken care of and off the front page. Even though DeCamp was on the fringe, it sets a bad precedent for someone to be murdered. Furthermore, a shooting is unacceptable in British society."

"Yes, sir."

Townshend hesitated. His eyes flickered up to Revill, then skittered away to a spot in the corner behind him. "I can't agree that Taine would be involved in anything like this. He's a British citizen, and to our knowledge, he's not broken the law. No. You're going in the wrong direction there. The American's our man. I'm certain of it."

Revill hunched his shoulders. He waited.

Townshend finally was forced to meet the man's sleepy blue

gaze. He dropped his eyes immediately. "Go on!" he commanded. "Go on!"

"We don't have enough to arrest him, sir."

Townshend waved his hand peremptorily. "Pick him up anyway. Grill him. Get a confession. That's an order, Revill."

The detective inspector shook his head. "Yes, sir."

Chapter Seventeen

Into the Trap

"Somebody's going to pay me four hundred pounds. That bastard owed me four hundred pounds and somebody killed him." Monro Taine drummed his pointed nails against the desk top. Had he cared to notice, he would have seen that his nervous habit had chipped the lacquer away in that particular spot.

Instead, he looked at the drawing of Rowdy MacPherson in *The Times*. "Is this the friggin' bastard who did it?"

"Whoever did dumped the body in Soho," the Egyptian murmured.

Taine's eyes narrowed. "Somebody's trying to push this off on us. Who? Who's got the balls to try to do us in?"

The Egyptian's reply was tentative. "The American is seen with Duchess."

"Duchess. Duchess!" Taine snarled and spat at the air. "Why does it always come back to her?" He pushed back his chair and began pacing round the room, his fury building. "Duchess!" He said the name as if it were a curse. "I want her. The bitch. I want her."

He spun round to jerk with a pointed thumb at the door. "Go yourself. I want it done properly. Bring her in here. Let's settle this friggin' business once and for all. She's been in my way too long."

The Egyptian's basilisk eyes blinked once. His mouth worked as if he'd been chewing on a particularly tough piece of mutton. "Maybe better—"

"Get her! Get her!" Taine screamed. His tiny figure was dwarfed by the sound. "Bring her in here!"

"Many people around her now," the Egyptian reminded him. "She not alone anymore."

Taine calmed. His color faded as his expression turned from thoughtful to canny. "Set a trap. A shipment too big to resist. She'll be afraid to come, but more afraid not to come. She's holding out, but it's eating at her. I'm holding out. Six girls. No. Eight. Eight fresh birds bound for Algiers. She won't be able to help herself. She'll come. And we'll get her."

"L'amour est enfant de Bohême, il n'a jamais, jamais connu de loi . . ."

"What did you tell me she was singing about?" Rowdy whispered in Duchess's ear.

The mezzo-soprano weighed two hundred pounds. She had no waist at all. The Spanish shawl that was supposed to be knotted seductively around her waist was actually tied in the middle of a solid columnar expanse of red satin.

Duchess consulted her program. "She's singing about how love never, never is faithful."

"Maybe not." The Texan's lips brushed her ear. His warm breath tickled. Her skin prickled along her arms. "Maybe so." She edged away from him. "Rowdy."

He followed her. "Course if she looks like that, the fellow might set his lights on somebody else."

Don José, a tenor shaped like an upside-down pear, moved stiffly away. The cigarette girl's mocking voice drew him back.

"Looks aren't everything," Duchess said primly.

"Ssssh!" The admonition came from behind them.

A few minutes later the soldiers had tied Carmen to the chair. She swelled her magnificent bosom until it threatened to pop out of the red satin and black lace. Throwing back

her head and arching her back, she sang, "*Près des remparts de Seville. . .*"

Rowdy leaned to Duchess again. "On the other hand, some fellows like big girls. I'm not one of them."

"This is not supposed to be realistic," Duchess whispered back. "You're supposed to enjoy the music."

He sat back again. The aria finished, and the audience burst into spontaneous applause as Act I ended. Rowdy applauded heartily and even whistled when people around him cried "Bravo." "Pretty good stuff."

"You hated it." Duchess let her gloved hands drop to her lap.

He raised an eyebrow. "I didn't exactly hate it. But let's put it this way. I wouldn't go out of my way to see any more." He rose and stretched, a huge figure in the stalls of the Covent Garden Opera House. All around him members of the audience whispered and pointed.

"I think they've seen us," Duchess said.

"I guess you could say that. I've been feeling like a wagon train straggling through the Comanche nation. A fellow over on the right almost fell out of his box, trying to get his glasses sighted in." He chuckled.

"Do you want to go?"

He looked around him at the gilt and velvet of the place, the shimmer and glitter of the patrons. "Not on your life. I've paid for these seats. As long as we're here where people can see us, I can't be out murdering anybody. We'll stay till the bitter end."

In so much as he was able, he imitated the clipped British accent. "Come, Evelyn. Let us stroll about. We shall have some refreshment." Then he lapsed into his familiar drawl. "I don't suppose I could get Bourbon and branch water."

"No, Randolph. Perhaps a glass of sherry."

He led her up the aisle. "You're breaking my heart."

In the lobby Mrs. Ivory Shires was waiting for them. "Duchess. Duchess." Peter, her butler, dressed in an evening suit and looking slightly bewildered, followed her through the crowd. "Duchess."

"Avory. Peter." Duchess smiled warmly for the first time that evening.

"And how lovely you look, my dear. Bronze is definitely your color. Although I wouldn't have guessed it. Hello, young man, so nice to see you again." She tilted her head back to scan his features through her amber-colored spectacles. "I had forgotten how tall you are."

Rowdy grinned equably. "I'm the biggest one in my family," he boasted. "My brothers stopped growing about two inches ago."

"You're finding everything to your liking here, are you? As well as cattle?" She added significantly, "Some of the most beautiful in the world."

Rowdy never lost his aplomb. He had met matchmaking mamas before. "Yes, ma'am. This is my fifth evening with Evelyn—since you introduced us."

Avory's expression turned very serious. "I have seen your notoriety in *The Times*."

Rowdy braced himself for an onslaught.

Instead Avory surprised him. "I must tell you I am not displeased. Sometimes the quickest way to get what you want is to attract attention to yourself and your cause. We learned that early on in the movement for suffrage. Now on to more important topics. Young man, just who are your family?"

He assumed the air of one making a speech. "The MacPhersons of El Rincon and San Antonio. My great-great-grandfather came from England, where he was a coast guard. His son, my great-grandfather, fought with Sam Houston at San Jacinto. After the war he married my great-grandmother, who was the daughter of a Spanish grandee, and the ranch came to him. It's an old grant from the King of Spain. El Rincon means The Hidden Valley."

"And where were you educated, young man?"

"At Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, ma'am."

"Please call me Avory. I suppose that's a most important institution in that part of the world."

"We think so, Avory. And my friends call me Rowdy."

Mrs. Shires smiled her approval. "Very well, Rowdy. You

“speak well and you dress well. Do you know whom you’re escorting?”

Rowdy flashed a smile at Duchess, who was blushing. “The prettiest girl in London.”

At that moment the attendants came through the lobby requesting that everyone return to their seats.

“Perhaps we’ll see each other later, Rowdy. I have more questions for you,” Mrs. Shires promised.

“I’ll look forward to that, Ivory.”

They saw no sign of Mrs. Shires nor Peter in the crush at the end of Act II. At the end of the opera more conversation was impossible in the bedlam of traffic.

The Hanson cab that Rowdy was able to commandeer had seen better days. The glass window that should have closed in front of them was missing. While the doors closed in front of their feet, they had to ride open to the elements on a raw night.

“Take it slow,” Rowdy warned the driver. “I don’t want my lady to take a cold. Or drown,” he muttered. He squinted his eyes in the peasoup fog which had a yellowish cast to it and stung his nostrils.

“Don’t you worry it, guv. That’s th’ only way m’ horse ’ll go,” the cabby assured him.

Rowdy shook his head as he put his arms around Duchess and gathered her in against him for a long and longing kiss. “Just so you won’t be cold,” he whispered against her mouth. When they broke apart, he let out a low whistle. “Lady, you build a fire in me that just won’t go out.”

She sat up in the circle of his arms and took a deep controlling breath. So far Cate had been right about everything. Rowdy had appeared on her doorstep the next morning and had shown no signs of going away. In fact, he could not have been more attentive. His ardor remained unsatisfied, even though he had “had his way with her.” According to the moralistic teachings of the day, he should have lost all respect for her and deserted her.

For herself, she was sure she was not a nice woman. As Cate

had foretold, she did not want any other men. In fact, she had not noticed them. In a haze of pleasure just to be sitting beside Rowdy, she could hardly control herself. She wanted to touch him, to kiss him. Moreover, she desperately wanted to repeat the wonderful experience of the night before.

The thought that he would be leaving England in a matter of days twisted her insides.

His hand on her shoulder brought her gently back into the circle of his arm to stare out into the fog, so thick that they could not see the horse's head. In a way it was like riding through a cloud. The creak of the carriage, the clop of hooves, the rattle of wheels sounded far away.

Rowdy leaned his cheek against the top of her head. The fog wet his face. "I hate this stuff," he murmured. "It burns my eyes and my throat. I'd hate to think what I'm breathing."

"Our springs are wet and cool," she conceded, "but the summers are nice."

"The sun's so bright and warm in Texas. The sky's so blue. The air is so clear and clean. If you could put it in bottles, you could sell it here for a dollar apiece."

"You're homesick."

He did not reply for a minute. When he did, his answer came softly with a touch of embarrassment. "I hate to admit it. It makes me sound like a kid, but this trip sure hasn't been the fun I thought it'd be."

In some ways he was infinitely younger than she. She caressed his cheek. "And I made you take me to the opera."

"You're right. That about caps the climax." A proposal of marriage was on the tip of his tongue, but he was a little afraid she would say he was being ridiculous. The time was not quite right. He still had a while. He would wait until Gill got back with the cattle and their plans were definite. He tilted back her head and kissed her deeply and set about building a fire with his lips and hands.

His mouth delighted her. Then delight quickly turned to painful longing. *Only a few more days*, kept echoing through her mind.

His palm was hot against her cheek, his breathing hard when

he tore his mouth away from hers and rasped. "I'd like to take you to the hotel."

"Yes," she managed.

"But I can't."

She lifted her face. "Can't?"

"Revill." Rowdy sat back in the cab and tried to find some ease by adjusting his clothing. "He's got the street around the hotel crawling with police. I can't take you in there. It would ruin your reputation."

She stared at him. "My reputation . . ."

He took a deep breath and tried to think of the cool green waters of the Gulf of Mexico. "You're a lady. A lady doesn't go to a gentleman's hotel room. We were lucky that time that you helped me home. You were in disguise, but now they'd be looking for me. And anyone who came in with me, they'd want to know all about."

"Oh." She realized he was being considerate. She should be thankful that she would be merely disappointed, not compromised. Not that anyone in London would care. They did not know her. Except that now they did. They had seen her with him—the scandalous American. Mrs. Avory Shires had sponsored her. Perhaps she might find some entry into a respectable life after all.

All too soon the cab arrived at her front door. He helped her to alight, escorted her up the steps, and waited while she opened the door. Then he put his arms around her and kissed her. A hard kiss, a demanding kiss, a frustrated kiss, a kiss of promise. Then he stepped back.

"Ride with me in the morning, Evelyn."

She smiled. The formal names were a good idea. They put them back on safe ground. She was beginning to get used to the name she had given herself. "Yes, Randolph."

She kept the door open a crack to watch as the cab pulled away. When she would have closed it, a shape materialized out of the fog. Heavy boots clumped. "Duchess."

"Johnny Ronce?" She stared at the hulking shape on the pavement.

"Right-o. I wasn't sure you'd remember me." He put one

foot on the stoop. He was an ex-boxer. Dangerous with his fists. A pimp with a stable of prostitutes who turned quick tricks dozens of times a night. He kept his girls working for hours with threats and beatings. But their customers always paid. Johnny saw to that.

She felt a thrill of horror and dread as he started up the steps. His brutalized face with its flattened nose looked like nothing human. "Don't come any closer or I'll scream fit to wake the dead."

He subsided instantly with a smirk. "Now, Duchess, what would a man like me want with someone like you?"

"To sell me probably."

He cocked his head into his overdeveloped left shoulder as if he were studying her. Then he grinned, exposing his broken snags. "Too old. And broken in. I've heard tales about them Americans."

She started to close the door.

"Hey, wait up."

"Go away."

"There's a big shipment goin' out, Duchess. More 'n half a dozen girls bound for some pasha in Algiers." He shook his head. "Poor birds."

"Did Monro Taine send you?"

"Him?" Johnny Ronce fell to cursing. "He's takin' all me trade. Bastard wants to drive us all out of business. He's taken over our best birds. Did y' hear what happened to Big Tilly?"

She had not heard, nor did she care to know. She realized that none of this seemed quite real to her anymore. Being courted by a gentleman, wearing beautiful new clothes, riding in the park, all had somehow distanced her from this. "Whatever happened to him, he deserved it."

"Ended up in the river, poor blighter." Johnny didn't sound mournful.

"Probably so drunk he walked right into the river before he knew what happened."

"There's some that say that he was dead before he ever hit the water. They say his head was busted open."

"I'm so sorry." Her voice dripped sarcasm. "An angel bound for paradise."

"I guess you're not in the business anymore." He started off into the fog.

She almost let him go, but a twinge of guilt made her call out to him. "Wait. Tell me about it."

"Boat's supposed to sail on the tide at dawn."

She was genuinely sorry. "I couldn't get my people together to save them."

"I could get the word to Bert for you. Him and me still knock down a pint or two together."

She remembered the trap. "You set us up before. And now you're way too eager."

He ground his teeth. A stream of profanity burst from his lips. "You warn't the only ones that got set up. I was set up m'self. I got me lights put out right after I talked to Bert, and two of me birds got snatched. Young ones. Fresh."

He was disgusting. He cared nothing for his girls except that they were commodities that had not outlived their usefulness before they were stolen from him. She started to close the door.

"I want me chance too," he snarled. "That monkey-mungo of Taine's is making this delivery himself. I owe him a lot and it ain't money."

She hesitated a fraction. "If you can bring Peter and Bert back here with you, I'll go. I won't come with you to find them."

He laughed a little; at least she thought the creaky sound he made was laughter. "Right-o, Duchess. You're too clever to be hauled off by the likes of me, if I were out to do you. Gimme an hour."

To her surprise Mrs. Shire's carriage rolled up to the door barely an hour later. Peter sat on the box muffled to the eyes. Johnny Ronce leaped down and held open the carriage door. "Ready?"

Dressed in her rags, she stepped out. "Ready."

Johnny put his hand under her elbow.

She put her foot on the step. "Bert?"

Another hand reached out and grabbed her wrist. She let loose a piercing shriek cut off when Johnny Ronce rammed his shoulder under her backside and shoved her in.

She kept her grip on the carriage and kicked backward, catching the pimp in the face and shoulder with her heels. He grunted, but the hand dragged her inexorably into the depths of the carriage. Twisting, bucking, cursing, she found the hand that held her wrist and champed down.

Her captor's fingers flew apart. She threw herself backward too late. Johnny Ronce slammed the door on her fingers. She screamed again. This time a sack came down over her head and the carriage bolted away.

She went still. No use to fight anymore. She was locked inside with at least one man. Two were on the outside. Better to save her strength and watch for her chances.

The sack was thicker than ordinary jute. Very thick. Her captor threw a rope around her arms and upper body. It had the effect of cutting off her air. She tried to protest, but her words were muffled. Her senses were swimming as the captor wrapped another coil and another.

A cold chunk of ice settled in her stomach. *Monro Taine*. And she was seven kinds of a fool to trust Johnny Ronce. Gathering her feet under her, she tried to calculate where the carriage door might be. There was always a chance that it might not have been fastened securely. Better to dash herself to death on the stones than be sold into slavery.

She flung herself against the side of the carriage. Her head crashed into a metal lamp bracket.

She thought she heard a laugh as she slid to the floor.

"Mrs. Nance, is *Duchess* ready?" Rowdy greeted the good lady with a bow.

"Oh, Mr. MacPherson. She's not here. She's not." Mrs. Nance pressed her handkerchief to her face. "My husband Bert's been here already this morning. He was knocked in the head last

night was Bert. He's all right, but Mrs. Shires's carriage was stolen."

Rowdy frowned. He was having trouble following her explanation. "Mrs. Shires?"

"My husband Bert works for her. Oh, don't you see?"

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid I don't."

"Is that Rowdy?" Pan clattered down the stairs and flew to him. Her eyes were dry. Her face was white. Lines of strain cut through the childish softness. She caught his hand in both of hers. "Oh, Rowdy. Rowdy. Duchess is gone. And Bert's been hurt. And Peter can't find the carriage."

"Settle down. Settle down." He gathered her in his arms and carried her into the house. She held on to him for dear life. "Pan," he soothed. "Pan."

"The rescuers . . ." was all she could say. She choked in her effort to hold back her sobs.

He sat down on the staircase, where he held her on his lap. Mrs. Nance hovered in front of them, weeping into her apron. The housekeeper seemed to be in a worse state than the little girl.

"We're the rescuers," Pan explained. "Bert and Peter and me and Duchess used to go in Mrs. Shires's carriage. We'd go and rescue girls. But we weren't supposed to do it anymore. It was too d-dangerous."

"Oo-oo-oooh," Mrs. Nance broke in. "Oh, Bert."

"Now Mrs. Shires's carriage is gone and Bert's been hurt."

"He was hit on the head, and when he came to, the carriage had been stolen," Mrs. Nance clarified.

"And Duchess didn't come home last night." Pan looked at Rowdy fearfully. "We hoped she might be with you, but she's not, is she?"

Finally, he had worked out the situation. And the situation frightened him. Duchess was missing. The carriage she used had been stolen and one of the men she depended upon for strength was hurt. "I left her here at the door after the opera."

Mrs. Nance gave a great groan and turned away. But Rowdy was aware only of Pan's face. It was the word "heartbroken" made flesh. The skin whitened and seemed to shrink across the

fine bones. Her tears continued to brim over and trickle down her cheeks, but the light went out behind the eyes.

"Pan," he whispered and gathered her close against his chest. "Pan. Sweetheart. We'll find her. I promise. I swear. We'll find her."

Pan managed to shake her head. He had to bend his ear close to her mouth to hear her whisper. "She's been kidnapped. And no one to rescue her. I was kidnapped—twice. She was there to rescue me. She came and found me and took me away safe."

Rowdy hugged her hard, his own heart breaking at the helpless agony, so evident in this small voice. "We'll find her, but we need help. If I was home in Texas, I could get a posse and track those hombres down. But I'm not. I think we'd better go to the police."

Pan did not seem to have heard him. He picked up her hand and found it cold as ice. He kissed it and then her cheek. "Pan, we'll get her back."

"Maybe someone would know among Duchess's friends," Mrs. Nance suggested. "Duchess has a lot of friends."

"I'm going straight to Revill," Rowdy announced. He kissed the child once more and passed her to Mrs. Nance. "Put her to bed. Can you send for your husband?"

"Yes."

"Have him and that other man . . . ?"

"Peter."

"Have them start asking around. If this place is like San Antone, nobody does anything that somebody doesn't see. I'll be back." He hurried out and swung onto the back of the gray gelding.

"Rowdy!" Pan broke away from Mrs. Nance and came running after him. She held up her arms. "Take me with you."

"Honey."

"I'm not just a little girl. I'm smart and I can slip into the littlest, littlest hole. I have to find her. I have to."

Rowdy looked down at the blue eyes. "Come on."

In a few minutes the streets of London were treated to the sight of the famous Texan galloping down the streets again,

his coattails and gunbelt flapping. Sitting in front of him, her arms tight around his waist, was a little girl.

“Duchess. The famous Duchess.”

Foul air from a filthy floor had never smelled so good. Her lungs, starved for oxygen, expanded in a frenzied gasp and she awoke. In the dimness she could see only a pair of feet in muddy boots, beneath gray and black striped trouserlegs.

Her panting subsided. Her senses prickled. Fear clawed at her. She had fallen into a trap. Humiliation, suffering, and ultimately death were very close. She struggled to get an elbow under her and raise her upper body.

Even though she looked into a dark silhouette with the light behind him, she could not doubt she was in the den of the infamous Monro Taine. “I’ve heard of you too.”

“Who’s the squealer?” he snarled.

“More people than you can imagine. They say you’re slime. That you make Johnny Ronce look like the Archbishop of Canterbury.” Still talking, still spitting out the words, she shifted onto all fours. Defiance needed an erect posture to carry it off. And she needed to gather her strength of will and body. “That there’s nothing so foul but what you’ll do it and take a profit. That you sold your own sister when she was twelve.”

He stepped on her hand.

She cried out in pain, but worse she had already shifted her body forward to push herself up. His force acted like a brake that tipped her over. Again, she fell sprawling.

He laughed. “I like to see you with your face in the dirt.”

He was grinding his foot into her hand, crushing the knuckles. The pain made her stomach heave. And it fueled her fury. She would not lie here in the dirt and let him torture her. From deep within her came not a scream, not a shriek, but a shout of anger. It galvanized her into action. With all the force of thighs and knees and ankles, she flung herself at his legs.

He tumbled back across his desk, rendered momentarily speechless by her surprise attack. She sprang to her feet and backed away, nursing her hand.

With a sense of satisfaction she met the obdurate blaze of hatred in his eyes. He just might kill her on the spot. At least he would send her swiftly away from his disgusting presence.

As he righted himself and straightened his clothing, she looked around her contemptuously. "This is the first time I've ever been inside a rathole. I can't say I'm surprised. It looks pretty much as I expected. Dark, foul . . ."

He chuckled. Instead of going after her again, he warily circled his desk and sat down. As he lighted a cigar, for the first time she noticed his inch-long fingernails, yellow from the cigar smoke, with black half moons under their tips. *The rat's claws*. She said the words aloud.

He blew a cloud of odorous smoke toward her, then gestured with his cigar. "Keep it up. Talk's cheap. It's all you've got left, bird. I won't hardly get enough for you to pay Johnny and Dogger, but even if it cost me, I'd still see you gone. You'll never stick your nose in my business again."

She had no answer. He was reading her a death sentence. She thought of Pan and Rowdy. Somehow she knew Rowdy would take Pan with him when he went to America.

Taine slammed his fist onto the desk.

The noise brought her back to the direness of her situation. He took another puff off the cigar. "I'll sit back and take a long smoke and grin. I'll think about what you're feelin' every day. Not too long though. Where I'm sending you, birds get plucked pretty fast."

His words chilled her to the bone. Still she rallied. "How can you be sure? I might end up a sultan's favorite, surrounded by fabulous wealth, my every wish granted."

His cold eyes crawled over her, undressing her as he had undressed hundreds of helpless innocents. "Not a chance."

She suppressed a shudder. "This time you've gone too far. The police will hunt you. I have friends."

He laughed. "You don't have no friends that can touch me. They try. My friends'll take care of your friends 'cause they want the profits coming."

She tucked her injured hand into her pocket. She had no doubt he was right, but if she could worry him for even one

minute, she would. Threats were all she had left. "Not this time. One of my friends has a gun."

"I've heard that big bloke. He shoots gamblers. He owes me four hundred pounds. Maybe I'll let him pay for a line on where you are. That's what I'll do. Sell him the friggin' information." He ground the cigar out in the ashtray. "And then have Dogger meet him when he goes there."

She swallowed, thinking of Rowdy galloping, neck or nothing, through the streets. She closed her eyes. Even now, he might have his cattle. He would have to leave the job of finding her to Scotland Yard and go back to America, to Texas.

A sound of shuffling feet. Her eyes flew open and settled on a dark corner of the room. The Egyptian came into the light. Rope dangled from his hands.

"How much did you have pay to Johnny Ronce?" she asked, suddenly desperate to delay the inevitable.

Monro Taine did not answer. Instead, he nodded. Smoke encircling his head like a demon's halo, he watched her struggle against terror as the Egyptian tied her hands behind her. The last thing she saw was his smile before the sack dropped over her head.

Chief Inspector Townshend stamped into Revill's office. "I've heard he's here. You've got him under arrest," he said eagerly. Then he frowned.

The notorious Texan sat in a chair in front of Revill's desk. Within the circle of his arm stood a small girl. Her face still bore the traces of tears, but otherwise she was composed. MacPherson's face was flushed with some deep emotion.

Revill looked at his superior officer in annoyance. "I haven't arrested Mr. MacPherson. He's here to report a kidnapping."

Instantly, Townshend stiffened. "Ridiculous. He's just trying to distract you. This man is responsible for the heinous death of one of our nation's peers."

Revill shook his head. "We don't have any proof of that—as yet." The last two words were added for Rowdy's benefit. "Right now, he has come to us with a very startling story. A

young woman was kidnapped from her home in the middle of the night. Sometime between the time he said good night to her at her door after the opera and the next morning when he came to take her riding."

Townshend harrumphed and shifted his feet. Then his eyes narrowed beneath his thin brows. "Do you have any witnesses to the kidnapping? Perhaps he murdered her as well and is trying to cover his tracks."

"Now listen here—" Rowdy began.

"There's nothing to indicate—" Revill objected.

"No," Pan said loudly. High and childish shrill, her voice cut through the others. "Rowdy didn't do it."

Townshend shot her a quelling look. "What is this child doing here? This is no place for children."

"She is the ward of the kidnapped woman," Revill supplied.

"Still, she shouldn't be here."

From the shelter of Rowdy's arms, Pan took up the argument. "I'm here because Duchess has to be rescued."

"Duchess! A duchess!" Suddenly, Townshend was all alarm. "A duchess has been kidnapped. Good lord!"

Revill covered his mouth with his hand. "Exactly," he muttered behind it. "That's why we have to get all the details. Now, Mr. MacPherson."

While Rowdy blessed Pan's tongue, the little girl flashed him an encouraging smile. "In going about her—er—good works . . ." Rowdy stumbled into a plausible speech, then gathered strength as his mind began to pull snippets of information together. "The duchess told me she'd gotten a real outlaw riled up at her. She'd had to pull in her horns and hide out."

Townshend looked at Revill for help, but the detective inspector was blinking and frowning in a puzzled fashion. "'Pull in her—er—horns?'"

Pan put her hand on Rowdy's cheek. "They don't understand your words."

He grinned. "I'm sorry. But you can understand I'm real upset by her turning up missing. A friend of hers, Mrs. Ivory Shires—I guess you all know her."

"We do indeed." Revill looked meaningfully at Townshend. "The mother of the Honorable Dudley Shires."

"Oh. Oh! Is she involved in this?" Townshend shuffled his feet uneasily. "That is unfortunate."

This time as Rowdy talked, he watched the effect his words were having on the chief inspector. "Mrs. Ivory Shires's coach was stolen and one of her drivers got bushwhacked."

Pan patted his cheek again. "You mean Bert was hit on the head."

"Shocking. Shocking." Townshend could see trouble ahead for the department and for the entire yard. "A duchess is kidnapped. A nobleman's mother is robbed. Does *The Times* have the story yet?"

"They're going to be getting it," the Texan promised, "if I don't get some help here."

Townshend shuddered. "Still, you are involved," he accused Rowdy. He assumed an authoritarian stance. "And all these people as well as the murdered man were involved with you. Revill, your duty is clear—"

Pan interrupted him. Leaving the shelter of Rowdy's arm for the first time, she confronted Townshend. "Rowdy wouldn't hurt Duchess. He loves her. He's going to marry her and take us to America with him. He's going to be my father."

"Pan." The blush burned Rowdy's cheekbones. He caught the look that passed between the other two men. She had really sent him up the river with that one. Unless he jumped right in with the real story, he was going to make things worse for himself when the time came to get out of this country.

Before he could frame a tactful denial, the little girl retreated to his side and put her arms around his neck. Laying her head against his shoulder, she whispered loudly enough for Revill and Townshend to hear. "I love you, Rowdy."

The words tugged at his heart. He tightened his grip on her and leaned his cheek against the top of her head. "I love you too, Pan."

Revill cleared his throat.

Townshend frowned and shuffled his feet. "On second

thought, your investigations should proceed in the proper order, Revill. Clearly, the kidnapping should take precedence."

The little girl stared at him solemnly. The American was clearly anxious to get on with his business. Townshend's eyebrows rose and fell. "I'll leave you to get right on it."

Revill's lips twitched. He opened his notebook to a fresh page and poised his pencil. "Right you are, sir. I'll take Mr. MacPherson's statement and get right on it."

Chapter Eighteen

Rowdy to the Rescue

"Monro Taine." Revill wrote down the name and underlined it. "That's all that needs to be said. I warned her. I knew she was in danger. But my hands were tied." He looked at Rowdy, his eyes world-weary and sorrowful.

"You don't know where he hangs out?" Rowdy asked.

"Surely. No doubt he's in his office at Continental Trading right now where he conducts seemingly innocent unprofitable ventures. And where we can't touch him." In an uncharacteristic gesture of frustration, Revill flung the pencil down and began to prowls about his office.

"He's mad as fire," Pan told Rowdy *sotto voce*.

Revill's sandy eyebrows knitted in a heavy scowl. "The truth is, Mr. MacPherson—the truth is a shame and a disgrace."

Rowdy waited, a cold feeling growing in the pit of his stomach.

"Monro Taine represents everything that is reprehensible and wrong in our society. He is a perpetrator of unspeakable acts, but members of our society profit by them. The very people who should be setting the standards for behavior—with the exception of Her Majesty, of course—are frequently misusing their power for personal gain. They can't be seen to take their profits openly, so they do so through men like Taine."

Rowdy let out his breath in a long disgusted snort. "Why don't you just quit beating around the bush and tell me?"

Revill stopped in midstride. He appeared to be staring at the picture of the Queen as if he had never seen it before. The passion was gone from his voice when he finally spoke. "I can't arrest Taine. There's no proof that he's done anything wrong. No proof at all. And he's a very wealthy man." Revill shook his head. "Actually, he's not a very wealthy man. He's a conduit. No, a sewer pipe. Through him passes a great deal of filthy money from the rich, who pay to take their pleasures at the expense of the poor. Some seize a chance to get some of their money back. So they keep him and his kind safe and even buy interests in these vicious establishments. They are in effect paying themselves through the tears and pain of unfortunate girls such as Duchess."

The speech was long. Revill turned from the picture of the Queen, whose name had become a synonym for moral behavior, and stared at the picture made by the man and grieving child.

With a look of disgust Rowdy rose, lifting the child with him. She locked her arms around his neck and he hooked his arm beneath her legs. "Just tell me where to find him."

Revill spread his arms helplessly. "I can't."

Rowdy thrust his chin out mulishly. Then he stared at the floor. "All right. Then we'll be leaving." He glanced ironically at the desk. "You've got my statement."

Suddenly, Revill remembered that the Texan carried a sixgun. "Don't do anything you'll be sorry for. Remember, you've got that child to think about now."

Rowdy's warning stare sent the detective inspector back to his desk. Even as he dropped into his seat, Rowdy bent over him. "Just tell me one thing. Who is Evelyn Smythe?"

"She's a rescuer," Pan said softly.

"But why?"

The American's question fell like a stone on Revill's head. "I can't tell you. She wouldn't thank me for it. And there's a chance. Just a chance that she might be all right. She's a brave resourceful girl. I've watched her over the years. If anyone can get out of the trap Taine's set, she can."

"God damn you!" Rowdy spun on his heel and stalked out carrying Pan with him, her arms locked in a death grip around his neck.

Revill followed him out into the hall. "It's too late," he called. "Don't you understand? She's been missing all night. It's too late."

Rowdy spun around. His face was flushed with anger. His eyes promised vengeance. "It had better not be," he said evenly. "Or hell won't be deep enough for that hombre to hide in."

Her captors had not put her aslea.

In fact, Duchess was relatively sure she had not been taken anywhere as yet. She had twisted and pulled at her bonds, until the lack of air in the confines of the sack had almost smothered her. Then she had drifted in and out of consciousness, or perhaps she had merely drifted into a kind of sleep. The hours had crawled by. She began to suffer from thirst and from other pressing discomforts.

Suddenly, beneath her ear she felt the vibration of footsteps. She opened her eyes, forgetting for a moment the smothering blackness of the sack. A door creaked. They were coming for her.

Though her very soul quailed, she had no chance to protest, no hope to gather her forces—meager as they were—for a fight. A hand caught the rope wrapped around her upper body, hauled her to her feet. A shoulder drove into her belly, doubling her over, and she was lifted in a dizzying swoop and borne away. Arms like bands encircled her legs behind the knees. She could not even kick. Her head bobbed. The sour taste of vomit trickled into her mouth as she was roughly carried along. She swallowed convulsively. If she could not control herself, she might strangle—

Just in time she was slung as ungently as a bag of wash onto a floor. A door slammed behind her, and the van rumbled forward. Now was her opportunity. She must get free. She twisted and fought against the ropes. Her hands were swollen, her fingers numb. Inside the sack she began to cry as her efforts

scraped the skin off her wrists. She knew she was bleeding. Yet she fought on desperately.

The van rumbled to a stop. She tensed and jerked again. *No use. No use.* The door opened and her captor caught her by the ankle and dragged her toward him. She planted a kick at where she surmised his head must be and was rewarded when her instep connected with solid flesh.

He cursed and slapped her bottom before he threw her over his shoulder again and jogged away. This time the strain on her neck muscles was too great. Her head snapped back, then forward from the rough treatment, and she lost consciousness.

"Pan, sweetheart, I'm going to take you and Mrs. Nance to the hotel to stay with my cousin Gill. He should be back by now. If he's not, then you wait for him until he comes. You'll be safe with him."

Pan shook her head stubbornly. "I want to go with you. I can help you find Duchess. I know every place to look. And I can be ever so careful. No one can see me. I'm very little."

"No." He put his fingertips against her mouth to silence her protest. "I know you could help me. I took you with me to Scotland Yard. And you were a big help. But this is very dangerous. I'd have to take care of you and me at the same time I was trying to find Duchess. And I need to ride fast."

"I could hold on to your waist just like I did today. I'd hold on tight. And when we found him, I could hit him in the knees. I did that once when they caught me and Bet. We laid a trap and Bet stood on a chair and I squatted down ever so small." She clenched her little fists. "I'm a good rescuer."

He hugged her hard. He could feel tears prickling against the backs of his eyes. How he loved this little girl! And how he wanted her to be safe!

"You know I'm right, Pan. I'd take you with me if I could because do you know what?"

"What?" She was trying very hard not to cry.

"You'll have the hardest part of all."

She looked up at him skeptically. Her eyes were slightly

sunken in her little face. Faint mauve smudging stained the white skin beneath them and made them appear bluer than ever.

"You will," he insisted. "Because you'll have to wait for me to come back with her. You won't know what's happening to us and you'll have to pray very hard for us. That's the hardest thing of all. The waiting. It takes a brave little girl to wait without crying."

She hung her head. "Do you think I'm brave enough?"

"I think you are." He put his arms around her again. "For right now you can cry a little if you want to."

"Oh, Rowdy." She hugged him fiercely, tears streaming. As if he had turned on a faucet, she cried. He held her during the storm, then took out his handkerchief and mopped her face and helped her blow her nose.

At last he straightened and took her hand. "Let's get Mrs. Nance."

The Stowers Herefords had been some of the finest cattle Gill had ever seen. His mind's eye was blessed with a picture of their descendants grazing cherry red and white against the spring green of a Texas pasture. Their beauty and size coupled with a thorough study of the books had impressed him from the onset of his visit. The herd bull, Sir George, showed remarkable potency as well as consistency among his progeny.

Sir Charles Stowers's consuming passion was his cattle. He talked at great length about them, called them by name, put his hands on their broad backs, lauded them, pointed out their fine points over and over. They stood like well-behaved children, chewing their cuds and gazing at him contentedly. Gill's head was spinning by the time his choices had been made.

At supper Sir Charles still held forth, expressing his delight at the prospect of his careful breeding being used to strengthen a line on another continent. He expressed a great desire to visit El Rincon in five years to see the results. Enthusiastically, Gill extended the desired invitation to him and his wife, and they had parted with much handshaking and waving.

The day was creeping on toward evening when Gill arrived

at the hotel, eager to share his success with Rowdy. What he found in the suite was a small blond girl and a middle-aged woman servant. With unexceptionable composure the child told him what had transpired.

"And now we have to wait," she said. Her voice quavered, but she managed to get all the words out. "Rowdy said that was the hardest of all. And he's right."

Gill looked at her strained face. "How old are you, Pan?"

"Seven. But I'll be eight soon."

"Uh-huh." He exchanged a look with the woman, who offered a wan smile. She looked scarcely more self-possessed than the child. "I think the thing for us to do is to go downstairs and have a good hot supper. I haven't had a pretty girl to eat with since I left Texas."

"Mrs. Nance too," Pan insisted.

"Of course, Mrs. Nance too. When a *caballero*"—he rose and bowed with a click of his heels and his best white-toothed smile—"entertains a *señorita*, she must have her *duenna* present."

Pan smiled. "You use as many funny words as Rowdy."

Gill frowned horrendously. "I thought I used more than he did."

A tiny chuckle was his reward. He opened the door and bowed them through. "After supper we'll come back up here and play some cards."

"Cards." The little girl looked interested. "I don't know anything about cards."

He wagged his black eyebrows at her. "That's all right. *Tío Guillermo* will teach you."

The gray gelding from the livery stable loped through the streets. Its rider's eyes under the broad-brimmed Stetson were blue steel. The frock coat blew gently back, revealing the Colt .45. No longer had he donned it for show. Before he left the hotel room, he had cleaned and oiled the weapon and tied the leather thongs at the tip of the holster around his thigh.

Patrons at the door of the Devil's Palace stared in awe. A

couple of gentlemen looked at each other and then climbed back into their carriage to be driven away. A group of four set up a discreet buzz.

He scanned them all, measuring them from the vantage point of his saddle. Unsatisfied, he swung down and tossed the reins to a footman. "Walk him. And keep him handy."

"Er—yes, sir."

In the antechamber the demon gave way instantly and Baal came to meet him as he stepped into the main room of the casino. "Mr. MacPherson. What's your special pleasure this evening?"

"Information." His gaze had flicked over the character portrayed by Edward Sandron and roved round the room.

"Ah." The host swept his cloak aside. "If you'll come this way, we can converse in privacy."

"This way" led through the card room, where Rowdy caught sight of a familiar face.

"Just a minute." He strode purposefully across the room, the cynosure of all eyes. Play stopped. Conversation died. Even the demons paused with their trays in their hands. "Cheviot."

The viscount's hands clutched the table. He glanced at his companions, then forced himself to relax. Slowly, he rose. "MacPherson."

"Your friend DeCamp. I'm sorry he's dead."

"Oh." The viscount's stiff face seemed to relax slightly. He allowed himself a small smile and a nod. "Thank you. Decent of you to say so, MacPherson. I'll pass your sentiments on to his family." Glancing around him at his audience, he raised his voice. "Sorry for the misunderstanding between your cousin and myself. Tomorrow I will rectify that mistake at the yard."

Rowdy could have let out a long breath of relief and whooped for joy. Instead, he nodded. "Much obliged."

Cheviot continued. "Bit of bad luck for poor old Clarence. I suspect he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or perhaps his luck ran out. He owed a great deal of money to the wrong people."

Rowdy nodded. "I imagined that was the way of it."

They shook hands while the rest of the room relaxed. Rowdy returned to Baal, who escorted him through an archway.

The demon lord seated himself not behind his desk, but in a chair in front of it and indicated that Rowdy should take the chair opposite. The Texan shook his head. His right hand resting on the handle of his famous gun, he prowled the small room like a tiger.

"How may I help you?" The demon lord crossed one leg over the other. Like a king in black raiment, he took his ease on a throne of crimson satin.

"When I came here last week, I almost ran the carriage over a woman with a little girl."

"London is a crowded city. You should drive more carefully."

Rowdy acknowledged the reproof with a nod. "Later that same night I accidentally met them on your terrace. As I recall, you knew all about the woman."

"I might have done so."

Rowdy sighed. "I was hoping you were her friend. She's in bad trouble. Got tangled up with a fellow named *Monro Taine*. And I think he's kidnapped her."

At the name, Baal sat up straight. The air of caution dropped from him. "*Monro Taine*." He shook his head. "When did you miss her?"

"She's been gone less than twenty-four hours."

Baal's expression turned bleak. "Too late. I'm afraid you're too late."

"God damn. You're the second fellow who's said that." Rowdy spun and slammed his fist into the wall. Paper tore and plaster cracked beneath the blow.

Baal sprang from his chair. He poured Rowdy a drink and pressed it into his hand. "Steady on. Perhaps there's hope. We can send out some people who might be able to find where they've sent her."

Rowdy turned the whiskey up and drank it down neat without a flicker. Then he flexed his hand. The knuckles had turned an angry red, and a piece of white plaster fell to the floor. He heaved a deep sigh. "So you think there's no chance of keeping her from being carted out of London?"

Baal put his hand on the other's shoulder. Tall as he was, the Texan topped him by several inches. "Not bloody likely. If that bastard Taine kidnapped her last night, she probably sailed on the morning tide."

Rowdy stepped out from under the other man's hand. A sense of infinite loss assailed him. He could feel his eyes burning. To lose her when he had just found her. To find someone who pleased him so much, who attracted him so much. He acknowledged to himself that he had fallen in love almost from the first clear sight of her.

Now he faced the bleak prospect of going back to the hotel and telling the little girl that Duchess was not coming home.

He shook himself. "No!"

"MacPherson." Sandron spread his hands.

"Hell, no! She's not dead. Right!"

Sandron hesitated. "In all probability she's not dead. Taine's determined to turn a profit on every deal. He wouldn't kidnap her to kill her. He'd want to sell her."

"And we're pretty sure this filthy piece of dogshit knows where she's being taken."

Again Sandron acknowledged by the nod of his head the truth of that.

"Then lead me to him." Rowdy drew his .45 from its holster at the same time he pulled a cartridge from his belt. Baal watched in open-mouthed silence as the Texan loaded six into the cylinder. He spun it once then snapped the loading gate closed. "If you don't want to lead me, then tell me where I can find him."

"He'll never tell you where he's sent her."

Rowdy's smile was an ugly thing as he slid the .45 back into its holster. "He'll tell. He's got everything to lose."

"We'll take my carriage."

Chief Inspector Townshend closed his office door and walked rapidly down the hall. A creature of habit, he left the Yard at 8 P.M. every night and walked one mile to his club. The constitutional was for the purpose of clearing the smoke of the

numberless cigars and cigarettes from his lungs and for clearing his mind of the unpleasantness of the day.

On this occasion he was shocked when Detective Inspector Clive Revill fell into step beside him.

"I haven't seen you on this street before," Townshend said.

"I don't walk this way," Revill told him. "But tonight I had a special purpose in coming."

"Oh, is that so?" The passersby in the street were numerous. People hurried to and fro on their way to their homes. Townshend wondered what Revill wanted, wondered at Revill's presumption.

From a well-to-do family himself, Townshend considered himself a cut above the rough men who were commissioned to be detective inspectors. Generally, they were recruited out of the ranks of the Metropolitan Police, who could be from any walk of life. Because they dealt exclusively with felons of the very worst sort, they were generally believed to be men of little delicacy or sensitivity.

Townshend would never had associated with Revill, nor would he have wanted to be seen with him even in such an innocent association as a walk along a street. Townshend's friends and wealthy acquaintances for whom he did numerous favors provided him an entree into society that was forever closed to the lower classes. The chief inspector considered their exclusion a very good thing.

They came to the corner. Townshend started to turn left, but Revill took hold of his arm. Townshend swung his head around, his brows flying together. "I walk this way."

"Not tonight." Revill's grip tightened. "Tonight, you and I are paying a call of singular importance."

Townshend pulled back, startled. "Have you lost your mind? I have no intention of going with you."

"Come along." Revill was no taller than Townshend, but he was solidly built, with heavy shoulders.

The chief inspector looked around for assistance. "You're insane. Where do you think you're taking me?"

"We're going to pay a call on a friend of yours."

"Of mine?"

"Monro Taine."

"See here now," Townshend's face reddened. "He's no friend of mine. Let go my arm this minute, or I'll have your badge for this."

"Probably so. But there may be a chance that you can do some good." Revill put two fingers into his mouth and whistled, loud and shrill. A driver halfway down the street swung his Hanson around and flicked his whip over the horse's back.

Still protesting, Townshend was pushed into the cab. Revill flashed his badge and an address which Townshend had never heard before. Only in a general way did he recognize it was in Soho. The cabby whipped the horse into a canter.

Into the fulminating silence Revill spoke. "Taine's business is everything that's filthy and reprehensible. I know it. You know it."

"I know no such thing. I don't even know who you're talking about." Townshend's fist was clenched around the handle of his umbrella. He brushed aside the curtain on his side of the cab. Should he to signal the driver to let him out?

"You do, Chief Inspector," Revill insisted.

Townshend's fist worked. "You're crazy. I tell you I never heard of him."

Revill smiled ironically. "Then it's time you met him. You've been protecting him for quite a while now."

The chief inspector's head snapped around. "That is a foul lie. Who told you that?"

Revill shrugged. "You know that girls are kidnapped off the streets and out of railway stations all over this city."

"Kidnapped!" Townshend snorted. "Don't be ridiculous! Loose women. Prostitutes. Seeking new employment. Everyone of them should be arrested and deported."

"Oh, I'm sure that Taine sees to that. Perhaps that's what you call it. By deporting them, he's saving England the trouble. Except that he's not *deporting* them. He's *exporting* them. And who gets part of the profits from his far-flung enterprise? Some of the richest and most prominent citizens of this fair city."

Revill sat upright against the back of his seat. He was very tired. The day had been long. But he would probably be able

to rest tomorrow. Tomorrow he would be out of a job. He wiped his hand across the lower half of his face.

Townshend caught the movement. He turned to look into the other man's face, reading there sadness and sickness of spirit. "See here, Revill." He reached over to pat the fellow's knee. "Why don't we turn this cab around and have him take us back to my club? We'll share a hot supper and a bottle or two. I'll forget this all happened. Why, man, you're exhausted."

Revill roused and moved his knee from under Townshend's hand. "Taine is most likely the murderer you want arrested. Information has come to me that Clarence DeCamp owed him four hundred pounds. Taine collects in blood if he doesn't get pound sterling."

"Now that is ridiculous," Townshend protested. "The American rides through the street with a gun strapped around his waist. He argues with DeCamp in front of witnesses. Something about gambling debts. Which is probably the reason for all this in the first place. Uncivilized behavior . . ."

For the first time in nearly twenty years on the force, Detective Inspector Clive Revill lost his temper. "No! No, sir! Not on your bloody life, sir. Bloody Chief Inspector Townshend. Uncivilized behavior is a seventeen-year-old girl being sold into prostitution and death because she dared to set herself to do what you and I wouldn't do."

Townshend fell back from the rage in Revill's voice.

Usually phlegmatic, the detective inspector brandished his fist in his superior officer's face. Each syllable erupted from between his lips like a battery of stones. "You and I are going to put the fear of the Almighty into that monster. We are going to tell him that he will return that seventeen-year-old girl to the bosom of her family and never trouble her again. We are also going to promise—to promise him that if he does not do so, we will personally see that his corpse is found floating below Bridge unless he has the good luck to drift out to sea and be lost entirely. Sir!"

Townshend gulped and looked around frantically as the cab came to a halt. Revill climbed out and passed a bill up to the driver. "Wait here!"

"Not fer a fiver I won't." The man looked around him and shuddered.

"Here then, dammit. Wait here!" Revill pushed another five-pound note at him.

"Be quick about it," the driver whined.

Townshend descended. They were closer to the Thames than he had ever been at this time of night. The fog was so thick and so foul that it burned his eyes and settled in his throat. He coughed experimentally, but nothing seemed to clear it. Instead, it seemed to be getting worse. "My God, where are we?"

"South of the Strand." Revill looked around as if getting his bearings. "Wait," he told the cabbie again. "The fog's too thick for anyone to find you."

"Then 'ow y' gonna find yer way back?" came the quick question.

"Come this way." He motioned to Townshend, who balked.

"This isn't safe."

The darkness covered Revill's ironic smile. "I've brought you this far. I won't let you stop now. Walk with me or I'll drag you."

"I'll have you up on kidnapping charges," the chief inspector promised.

Into an alley they plunged, trekking through mud that squished up around their feet. Icy water leaked in through the stitching in their soles at the first step.

"Damn you," Townshend complained. "These are new boots."

"I'll stand you to another pair," Revill promised. "With my mustering-out pay." At the end of the alley, he patted his gloved hand along a wall until he found the door. At first it resisted his efforts, but he set his foot against the handle and broke it in with a sodden splitting of wood. "After you, Chief Inspector."

Townshend cursed his subordinate before stepping into the dark.

"This way." Revill took Townshend's arm and led him along a passage. Far in the distance they could see a glow.

"Do you know where we're going?"

"Yes, sir. Unfortunately, I've been here before."

"Under what circumstances?" Townshend inquired, but Revill did not answer.

The light was growing stronger. It seeped between crudely finished boards nailed together over a couple of crosspieces to form a door.

"Monro Taine!" Revill called.

Behind the door came a scuffle of feet and unintelligible exchanges. Metal scraped against metal.

"Taine!"

The door swung silently open.

"Go on." Revill pushed Townshend in ahead of him.

The Egyptian from the Sudan aimed a British officer's side-arm at the chief inspector's belly. Townshend neither blinked nor recoiled. Instead his face assumed an expression of cold disdain. He did not like people from the lower levels of society. In his estimation foreigners were especially low. He directed his attention to the figure behind the desk.

Monro Taine eyed the intruder. "Where'd you come from?"

"I brought him." Revill stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. "Put that thing away, man," he ordered the Egyptian. "We came to deliver a message to your master."

The Egyptian neither lowered the gun's muzzle nor stepped back.

Both of Taine's skeletal hands lay before him on the desk, the stiletto fingernails drumming incessantly. "What the hell you want, Revill? And who's this?"

"Best you be polite to him," Revill warned. "He could arrange for something very unpleasant to happen to you."

"More threats, Inspector. Keep 'em coming and I'm going to get mad." Taine's eyes narrowed. His own words carried a threat.

"Then I'll make this short. We came for Duchess."

Taine hesitated a mere second. Then he reached for his cigar. "Ah, Duchess. A real good looker, I hear. Too bad she's so old. She won't pay attention to what people tell her. Even if it's for her own good. You know some gent's going to have himself a real wild time some night."

Revill closed his eyes against the picture. When he opened them, they were icy with resolve. "Where is she?"

"How would I know?" The diminutive shoulders rose and fell. "I only know about her from stories I've heard. I've never met her." He blew a cloud of gray smoke into the air, making it fouler.

"Perhaps you'd better tell us what we want to know, so we can be on our way." Townshend spoke for the first time.

Taine squinted at the other man. He grimaced and used a long fingernail to rake a fragment of tobacco from his tongue. Then he pointed with the cigar. "You may not leave here at all, Whoever-you-are. Revill knows better than to bring anybody here. This place ain't on any swell's social list."

"I'm Townshend."

"What?" Taine faltered. He stood up, leaning forward to get a better look.

The chief inspector blinked at the man's small stature. The corners of his mouth twitched in a contemptuous smile. "You heard me. We want the girl and be quick about it."

The procurer's face reddened at the sight of the smile. "Sod you!" he snarled. "Get yourselves the hell out of here. There's those that would take your job in a minute if they knew what you're doing." He slapped the book that lay open before him on the desk. "You're getting in the way of business."

It was the one argument that carried weight with Townshend. He hesitated, his eyes flicking nervously toward the ledger. "We'll be gone just as soon as we get the information." He sounded less sure of himself. "We'll even pay you for it."

The offer appeared to calm Taine. The two men could see the calculating look dawn in his eyes and then disappear. "Friggin' hell," he whined. "I don't know where she is. I'm not in the business of buying."

Footsteps sounded in the dark hallway—heavy bootheels, moving fast.

Taine sneered at the two men. "I might as well set up shop in Victoria Station."

The Egyptian hurried to open the door.

Too late! Edward Sandron in full panoply as Baal, the demon

lord, pushed it open. In he strode with a swirl of crimson-lined cape. The cigar smoke eddied and wavered before it. He started at the sight of Revill.

Behind him Rowdy MacPherson filled the doorway. His coat was peeled back behind his gun. His right hand rested on the handle. "Which one of you owlhoots is Monro Taine?"

Chapter Nineteen

The Lord's Dream

Duchess's captor had tossed her on her back onto a surprisingly soft bed and tramped out. Mind whirling, she listened to the closing of the door, the turning of the key in the lock. The smothering effects of the sack made her heartbeat loud in her ears. She struggled to sort it out and listen. Was she alone?

She could not endure her position for more than a few seconds. The weight of her body crushed her fingers under her. Beyond fear, alone or not, she rolled over on her side. Her wrists still felt bound in bracelets of fire. From knuckles to elbows, her arms throbbed and added to her other ills.

The sack still encased her. Several lengths of rope still bound her arms tightly to her sides. Even though her feet were free, she was still blind. And dying of thirst. Worst of all, she no longer had the heart to try to free herself.

Despair. She ceased to struggle and gave her mind over to a sort of blankness. She had lost the freedom of choice. All control of her body depended upon someone else. She must wait helplessly until someone came to relieve her situation, or until she lost consciousness for the last time. In that state, she drifted, neither waking, nor sleeping.

The lock clicked. It set off an alarm in the depths of her

being. Her first impulse to sit up, to find the floor with her feet, died. Helpless, frozen with fear, she waited.

Footsteps, so light she could not be sure she heard them, approached. A hand touched her thigh, her hip. She could not be sure whether it touched her benumbed fingers.

Then cold steel touched her arm. A knife? It sawed through the rope at her wrists. The rope around her body. The cord at the bottom of the sack. Her arms, long bound, fell apart limply.

Someone caught hold of the bottom on the sack and peeled it up, wrestling it off her, wooling her body from side to side until—

Light blinded her. Blessed air rushed into her lungs. Her hair, wet with perspiration fell over her face. An arm lifted her, a glass of water touched her lips. She drank thankfully, still unable to move her arms. Then the water was taken away and the hand pushed her hair back from her hot forehead.

"Hello, sister."

"Cate," Duchess moaned hoarsely. Then she could not help herself. She burst into great shuddering sobs.

"There. There." The procuress of the Lord's Dream sat down beside her and put her arms around her.

Minutes passed before Duchess could think about getting herself under control. When she tried to pull her arms around in front of her, the pain of her strained muscles and tendons brought fresh tears. "W-would you help me? P-please."

"Too sore to move." Cate did not ask the question. Taking Duchess's elbow, she moved her right arm in front of her. She made a wry face. "That wrist's a mess."

"I tried to get free."

"I see you did. Didn't have much luck, did you?" Cate moved the left hand to rest beside the right.

Duchess looked down at them, and the tears started afresh. Both wrists as well as the backs of her hands halfway to the knuckles were swollen, blue, skinned, oozing blood. Her fingers looked like red sausages, nor would they move when she tried to wiggle them.

"We're going to need hot water and bandages for those." Cate left her side to open the door into the hall and ring a bell.

Duchess managed to lift her left arm and push back the hair that straggled down in her face. "How did I get here?"

Cate strolled back to her. Instead of her usual negligee and underwear, she was wearing a black bombazine dress, with rich lace collar and cuffs. A cameo encircled with pearls fastened the neck. Her face, bare of her usual heavy makeup, was fashionably pale. The look was too severe for a lady of good family. She looked like a businesswoman. "I bought you."

Duchess's eyes flashed up to meet narrowed eyes and a feline smile. Slowly, she looked around her at the room. She was sitting on a wide fourposter draped in pink satin and swagged with gold tassels. Red-flocked wallpaper glowed in the gaslights. A slipper chair sat beside a single small table with a decanter of dark gold liquor and a couple of glasses. And on the wall hung a panoply of leather whips and cuffs.

Cate pulled a silver case from her pocket and lighted her cigarette off a gaslight. "Relax. I don't intend to offer you to one of my customers." She chuckled as if she had made a very funny joke, expelling smoke in long stream. "For one thing I value them too highly. I wouldn't want them injured. Or worse. Preached to."

Still chuckling, she answered the sharp tap at the door. Standing there was a heavysset man in livery. "We need hot water and bandages, Charly."

"Right y' are. Any trouble with 'er?"

"No. No trouble. Send Eunice up with a tray of food and liquor." Cate closed the door. She glanced at the decanter on the table. "I wouldn't offer you that stuff." She laughed again. "Some of our old men need quite a bit of help."

During the interlude Duchess had found a handkerchief in her pocket and made an effort to wipe her face. She was sweating as needles and pins of feeling returned to her hands. "I need to use the lavatory."

Cate nodded. "Hold on." She stepped to the door and looked up and down the empty hall. "Third door on the right. Lock it."

When Duchess returned, Eunice had evidently come and

gone. A large tray with food and drink had replaced the small one on the table.

"Eat or bandage first?"

"Eat. No. Drink." Duchess looked at the decanter. "Is that brandy?"

"The best." Cate poured an inch into a glass. "Drink it slowly."

Duchess closed her eyes as the liquor blazed a trail down her throat. She shivered. "I don't care for brandy as a rule . . ."

"But sometimes it's the only thing," Cate finished for her.

Duchess closed her palms around the glass. "I thought I was lost."

Cate poured herself a drink. "You almost were." Looking into the eyes of her other woman, she toasted solemnly. "Be glad I pay top prices."

The knowledge made Duchess want to cry again.

"Monro Taine really hates your guts."

Duchess was forced to agree with her. "I don't see why."

Cate shrugged. "It could be because the Texan killed a man who owed him money. You were seen around town with the Texan. Maybe he thought he'd get the money by kidnapping you. Who knows what that scum thought?"

"That doesn't make sense. He's already sold me. But I wasn't seriously affecting his business. I'm just a single person, trying to do a bit of good."

Cate bent down until their faces were only a few inches apart. "But you're the only one," she informed her as if imparting a great secret. "The only one in the whole city of London who dares or who cares. You're like a single thorn on an otherwise perfect rose." She straightened abruptly and laughed. "I do wax poetic, do I not?"

Duchess had finished the brandy and was staring at the wreck of her hands. With a feeling of relief, she found she could move each finger, and a bit of natural color was returning to them. A knock at the door startled her. She glanced fearfully in that direction and then up at Cate.

Oddly, the procuress seemed to understand. "Don't worry," she soothed. "You'll get over that in a few days. Come in!"

The door swung open to reveal a woman so huge that she filled the opening except for less than a foot at the top of her head.

"Bring it in, Nessie."

Swaying from side to side with each lumbering footfall, the woman entered. The floor creaked beneath her weight. Her breath sighed in and out like a blacksmith's bellows. In each hand she carried a pail from which steam rose. Under one big arm, she had tucked a roll of white linen. She set them both beside the slipper chair. One huge hand reached out and took Duchess's small one. She turned it over and back, studying the wounds. "Not so bad," she commented. "There's salt in the water."

Then as ponderously as she had entered, she departed.

Cate caught Duchess's open-mouthed amazement. "Oh, we're just one big happy family here. Each of us has his jobs. Nessie's is cleaning up. Both the house and the girls."

Duchess could feel the nausea rising in her. The brandy on an empty stomach was about to make her ill. Cate must have read the signs, for she passed a plate with a hard roll on it. "Eat a bite of bread."

While Duchess chewed and drank a cup of hot tea, Cate washed her patient's hands by the simple method of submerging them in the water. It was hot and the salt found every crevice. Duchess had to bite her lip and still she whimpered. When the blood had dissolved, Cate poured brandy over them.

As the liquid burned the raw flesh, Duchess cried and moaned and writhed. Cate laughed at her and called her a baby. Still, she endured it to the bitter end, holding her wrists over the bucket until Cate was satisfied that she would not get an infection. The bandaging was nothing after that, the work of a minute.

"Now." Cate lifted the cover on the plate. "Take a bite of this excellent squab and some rice and peas. Then you can lie down and sleep."

Somewhat to her surprise, Duchess could manage only a few bites before her appetite failed her completely. She tried to lever herself off the bed, but her balance was off. Perhaps she

was too drunk to stand, or perhaps she was too exhausted for her legs to bear her.

She held out a pleading hand to Cate. "I need to go home. Pansy will be hysterical."

"The brat." Cate shrugged. "I'll send for her if you want me to. In the morning. Or late tomorrow afternoon. You have to stay here for a while."

"But—"

"Monro Taine would hear about it if you went back onto the streets. He wouldn't like it at all. He might not sell you to me again." Cate turned the gaslights low and came back to stand beside the bed.

With her hair a soft fluff of dark ringlets and with no garish makeup, she was beautiful. In the dim light, she looked almost angelic. She put her hand on Duchess's shoulder and pressed her gently back onto the pillows. "I'll lock the door behind me. No one can get in. I'll have the only key, so no one can disturb you. I'll see you in the morning."

Duchess tried to protest, but her mind was whirling too much for coherent thought. Her eyes were closing before her head touched the pillows.

Townshend gaped. Revill closed his eyes and shook his head wearily. The situation only needed the arrival of the Texan with his wild ways and his .45.

The Egyptian from the Sudan fell back, the muzzle of his arm slipping toward the floor.

Taine cowered back behind his desk. "Shoot him, Farouk! Shoot him!"

"So that's the rattlesnake?" Rowdy looked to Baal, who nodded silently.

Rowdy pointed his gun first at the Egyptian. "Why don't you just lay that iron down, fella? Nice and easy. We wouldn't want you dropping it. It might go off and shoot somebody in the foot. That's right."

Trembling, the man stooped to do his bidding and then retreated silently across the room.

"Thank you kindly." The Texan nodded. "Now. Taine."

Taine had jumped to his feet, but he sank back in his seat when he discovered the intruder was fully two feet taller than he. He fixed his eyes on Baal. "Who's this friggin' fool," he blustered. "Why'd you bring him here?"

"He's looking for a friend of his—and mine, I might add."

Taine licked his thin lips. Duchess! He would swear they had come about her. His fingernails chipped at the lacquer on the desktop. Who would have thought that the disappearance of a female could have caused this much trouble?

Pretending not to understand, he gestured broadly with his cigar. "How would I know where a friend of yours is? Hell. We don't run in the same circles. On the other hand, just open the doors and we'll have a friggin' party."

At the same time, his voice cracked and broke. His eyes skittered from one stony face to the other. The room was much too small for so many men. Especially when one of them held a gun. He was used to being in control. Their smothering presences made him sweat.

"Where's Duchess?" Rowdy emphasized his words by pointing the gun at Taine's heart. "We came for Duchess."

"Duchess?" Taine's nails drummed frantically. "What would a duchess be doing in a hole like this?" He chuckled lamely as he lifted his cigar to his mouth. The damned thing had gone out. He tried to catch the eye of Chief Inspector Townshend, but the man was too intent on the Texan and the Devil. And incidentally on the Colt .45 the former was brandishing.

Taine lighted his cigar again and blew smoke into the tainted air. "I don't know any duchesses. I'm just a simple businessman trying to eke out—"

"My advice is that you forget all that and tell him quick." Revill had not spoken in so long that Townshend looked around at him in surprise. "This man is from Texas in America. He won't stick at shooting red Indians. He's not what we think of as civilized."

Taine blanched. The .45 barrel yawned in front of him unwaivering.

Revill warmed to his work. His voice grew stronger, more

positive. "Scotland Yard thinks he's already killed one man, but we can't prove it. Of course, if we saw him shoot you down like the dirty dog you are, then we'd be able to arrest him."

Taine puffed furiously. His eyes reddened in the smoke. "You—"

"Hold on!" Rowdy clicked the hammer back on the pistol. Until that moment no one had noticed that it had not even been cocked. "I'm here for my lady. You bring her out and we'll be on our way."

"I don't have her."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

Rowdy moved like a striking rattler. His left hand shot out and fastened in the little man's shirtfront. Before Taine could move or protest, he was dragged over the desk and up until his face was only a few inches from Rowdy's. The Texan pressed the muzzle of his gun under Taine's chin. "You'd better remember, mister," he grated. "Or you're going to be pretty damn dead."

Taine tried to speak. Tried to protest. He clawed at Rowdy's wrists with his fingernails.

Rowdy pressed the gun harder, making Taine squeal. "I don't appreciate some bobcat clawing my arms all bloody either. I might squeeze this trigger a little too hard and then you'd be a blowed-up toad-frog."

Taine's nerve broke. His hands fell away. He began to blubber. "S-she was here. She was."

"And where is she now?"

"I don't know. I don't know. I don't have any idea where the girls come from. They come to me and want to work. I find jobs for them."

A general rumble of disgust echoed among the men in the room.

"I do. I do. I'm just a middle man." He twisted his head, seeking support from Baal. "Tell them, Sandron. Tell them. You and me. We're just like the employment services. We give them opportunities."

"Don't put me in your class, Taine." Baal pulled his cloak

around him proudly. "I run a gambling establishment, which is not against the law. I put on a show for the customers. Again, not against the law."

"I don't give a good goddamn," Rowdy snarled. He shook Taine until the little man's teeth rattled then he slammed him back into the chair, which went crashing into the wall. Rowdy was over the desk in a single lithe movement. They might have been the only two people in the room, so intently was his attention focused on Taine.

"I'm going to count to three. If you don't tell me where to find Duchess, I'm going to start by shooting a big hole in your left foot."

Taine screamed like a woman. "Stop him. You're from Scotland Yard. Stop him! You're sworn to protect the citizenry."

"One!"

Townshend stabbed a finger at Revill's chest. "I order you to obtain a warrant first thing in the morning. There's not the slightest doubt in my mind that this man shot DeCamp."

"Right-o, Inspector. First thing in the morning."

"He's going to shoot! He's going to shoot me!" Taine screamed to the man who should have been his ally. "Tell him to do something now. Damn you! Now!"

Revill hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his vest. "Wife doing well, Sandron?"

Townshend looked from one to the other, intrigued by a side of Revill he had never seen before.

Behind him, Rowdy growled. "Where is she?"

Taine screamed again. "Stop him! Stop him! Damn you all."

"Cassandra is top of the trees." The demon's smile was filled with love. "And Scotty is getting so big he practically bowls me over when he jumps on me. Marriage is a wonderful institution."

"Two!" Rowdy aimed the pistol at Taine's foot.

"No! No! Help!" Taine sprang to his feet and began dancing.

"You better stand still." Rowdy grabbed Taine by the collar when the procurer tried to run for the door. "If you keep jumping around like a damn jackrabbit, I might miss your foot and shoot you in the belly." He sighted along the barrel. "Thr—"

"*Dogger!*" Taine threw himself across the desk. "*Dogger!* Dogger took her. I don't know where he took her."

Rowdy collared him. "Try again."

"I swear. You'll have to find Dogger."

"No." Rowdy twisted him off the desk. The little man fell to the floor, where he groveled, whining and sniveling. "You're going to take us to him."

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a movement. He swung the Colt in the Egyptian's direction. "One more step, mister, and you're going to get a perforated foot."

"He's a murderer," Taine howled and rolled over on all fours. "Save me. Save me." He began to crawl toward the police officers.

Townshend stepped fastidiously away, his aristocratic nostrils quivering in contempt. The look he fastened on Revill was a call for his subordinate to share that disgust. Instead, Revill merely raised a weary eyebrow and shrugged.

Townshend's disgust faded. His eyes dropped. At that moment a deafening report shook the room.

Groveling, howling, crawling, Taine had reached the gun the Egyptian had laid on the floor. While Rowdy's attention centered on the servant, Taine's hand had closed over the butt of the pistol. Giving one last howl, he'd rolled over, pointed the gun at Rowdy, and pulled the trigger.

The men froze in shock. Rowdy clutched his side and staggered back, his weapon wavering. The Egyptian recovered first. He leaped across the room and barreled into Baal. In a flapping of black and crimson material, Sandron crashed into Revill. The Egyptian dashed out the door.

"Stop! Damn you!" Taine climbed howling to his feet, fumbling with the trigger mechanism. "Help me!"

Rowdy rallied. His blood flowed hot into the palm of his hand. The force of the blow had knocked the breath out of him. Yet he felt no pain. Clutching his side, he leveled the gun at Taine's chest. "Drop it, hombre."

Taine was insane with fear and rage. He pointed the Webley at Rowdy and jerked the trigger. The bullet spanged into the bronze paperweight on the desk. It spun off onto the floor.

Gritting his teeth to steady his aim, Rowdy squeezed the Colt's trigger. The gun bucked in his hand. Monro Taine slammed backward into the wall. His body fell like a child's discarded toy. Without any use of its tendons and muscles, it slid disjointed down the wall, dead before it collapsed on the floor.

The four men froze. Like soldiers in a war zone, they were deafened. Then in stunned silence they began to tremble as the reverberations died and the smoke cleared. Three shots had been fired. Two had hit flesh.

Rowdy MacPherson could feel the hot blood coursing over his hand and down his side beneath his clothes. He drew in a shallow breath, experimenting. His side was numb, particularly in the ribs just above his waist. He tottered to Taine's desk and sat down on top of it. Holstering his gun, he pushed his coat aside and began to pull his shirt from his waistband.

Baal rallied next. Flinging aside the folds of his cape, he came over to help. "How bad is it, old man?"

"Don't know yet." The Texan gritted his teeth as the burning began. "I'm bleeding some."

Baal bent to inspect, reaching up to direct the light, such as there was, to the area.

"Good lord." Townshend shook himself and looked over the scene. "A bloody abbatoir. Inspector Revill, arrest that man."

Instead, Revill knelt beside Taine's body and felt for the pulse in the wrist.

Baal pressed his handkerchief to the wound. "Looks like a deep groove, old man. I'd say you might have a cracked rib. How does it feel?"

Sweat broke out of Rowdy's forehead. He squinted as it trickled into his eyes. "Like I've got a cracked rib."

"Revill!" Townshend demanded.

Baal hesitated. His eyes met Rowdy's. "Do you want a doctor?"

Rowdy clenched his teeth as he pulled the soaked handkerchief away. To have this happen just when he needed his full strength made him angry. And the anger steadied him. "No sawbones. Could you rip the tail off my shirt and make me

another pad? I think it'll stop in a little while. Damn that sidewinder. It's my own damn fault. How'd I forget that gun on the floor?"

"I forgot it too," Revill offered. He came around on Rowdy's other side and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "We can get a doctor and an ambulance in short order."

"No. I don't need one. And I don't want one."

Baal ripped the shirt tail and folded it into a pad. Rowdy accepted it gratefully and stood. "I've got to get better fast." He closed his eyes. "Why don't you see if there's any whisky in that desk? I could sure use a drink."

"A drink. The very thing." Revill began to pull open the drawers, rummaging through papers, tossing them aside.

Townshend was turning purple with rage. "You are helping a murderer, Inspector Revill."

"I didn't see him commit a murder." Revill found a bottle with a clear liquid in it. He opened it, sniffed, and blinked. "I think this is gin—or some kind of rat poison."

"Same thing." Rowdy turned it up. A single swallow left him coughing with tears spouting from his eyes. He held the bottle out to the light. "No worm in the bottom."

Baal pulled out his own handkerchief and added it to the pad. With a critical eye he observed that Rowdy's normally white skin was whiter than ever, the veins shrunken beneath the surface in the beginnings of shock. "Maybe you'd better sit down, old man."

"We've got to find Dogger." He wiped his hand across his forehead, leaving a streak of blood. Glancing down, he saw the red spatters begin on the floor. "I've got to get out of here," he murmured swaying. "I need some fresh air *my pronto*."

Revill put an arm around his shoulder. "I think I may know where to find Dogger." He looked at Townshend. "I make it my business to keep an eye on most of the miscreants in this area."

Townshend glared.

Rowdy took another pull off the bottle of gin and started off stiff-legged for the door. When he banged his right side against the jamb, he cursed hoarsely and swung back around into the

room, bracing himself against the wall. "Pardner," he muttered to Baal, "see if you can figure out something to tie that pad tight."

The latter let his dark eyes rove round the room. "Perhaps Taine's braces."

"The very thing," Revill agreed. With deft movements he took them off and tossed them to the gambler.

"This is ghoulish," Townshend snarled.

Rowdy drank again while Revill and Baal passed the elastics around his body. He set his jaw and stood, taking a controlling breath. They looked at him doubtfully. "I'll do." He nodded, even managing a wan grin. "Let's go find Dogger."

Duchess awoke to music—a guitar or a mandolin and someone singing. The words were too faint and far away for her to make them out. She wished she could understand them. How pleasant to lie here on the soft bed and be entertained with sweet words.

Sweet words! Her eyes opened carefully. The room was gloomy gray, its vibrant colors dimmed in the morning light seeping in around heavy drapes. The events of the single night were like a bad dream. She had no idea of the time. The night was gone, but how much of the day? How many hours had elapsed since she had been kidnapped?

The pain in her arms and shoulders was bearable when she lay perfectly still, but she steeled herself to move. Tentatively, she slid her legs over the side of the bed. No one had bothered to tie her ankles. At least she was not crippled.

Gritting her teeth, she let the weight of her legs help to lever her up. Apart from a brief dizziness, she sat erect with little wasted motion. She studied her arms and hands. On either side of the narrow white bandages, the skin was bruised and the backs of her hands were abraded.

Carefully, she stood. Her back creaked like an old woman's, but she straightened stubbornly. Without thinking, she raised her arm to brush the hair out of her face. With only a bit of

discomfort, she managed to do so. The simple act encouraged her. She was going to be all right.

The teapot sat on the tray along with the remains of the meal and the decanter of brandy. She lifted the lid and winced. Black as midnight and strong enough to float the spoon. She poured herself a cup and sweetened it with brandy before she drank. The potent restoratives sent shudders through her, but she flexed her shoulders and doubled her hands into fists.

Did she dare make her way out of the room? Did she dare not? Grim-faced, she opened the door and looked out. The hall was empty. *Third door down on the right.*

In the bathroom she stared at herself in the mirror. Her face shocked her. Her hair was a tangled mess of snarls and loops dangling around her cheeks. A dark bruise glistened on her cheekbone. Her eyes were huge, ringed with dark circles. Her lips looked rough and cracked. And overall, every crease in her skin was marked by a dark line.

She shook her head. The sack they had used must have been a coal sack. She was lucky not to have suffocated.

She had wet a cloth and was starting to dab gently at her cheek when she heard from far away the faint sounds of commotion. Men's voices heavy and growling, Cate yelling back at them, giving as good as she got.

Duchess smiled a little. Any man who tackled Hecate would find himself with his hands in briars.

They were coming upstairs. A chill prickled her spine. Suppose Monro Taine had somehow found out in whose hands she had been placed. Would he want her back? Would Cate sell her?

Escape. She must escape.

She slipped out the door. She could hear them marching like an invading army. At any minute they would turn the corner. She dashed for the doors at the end of the hall. Jerking one open, she flung herself through it and closed it behind her.

Pressing her body against it, she held her breath.

More noise. Doors opening and closing, coming closer. She would not be taken again. She would fight.

"Duchess! *Du-chess!*"

Rowdy's voice bawling her name. Rowdy MacPherson. No one else in the world drawled her name in quite that fashion.

"Rowdy." She opened the door a fraction and peeked out. "Rowdy." She breathed his name. He was not among the group of men congregated in the hall.

Cate stood among them, her skirts brushing around their legs, her red mouth curved sardonically. She was dressed in black satin with feathers and net. Her pale cheeks were whitened with rice powder and her black brows and lids were heavily painted with kohl. Her mouth was a scarlet slash. She ran her eyes over Chief Inspector Townshend in a way that made him clear his throat and adjust his old-school tie.

Her eyes roved on to Revill. "The detective inspector himself. Come to check to see whether we've killed anybody lately?"

"There's nobody in here," a hoarse voice boomed down the hall.

"Rowdy," Duchess murmured. Her ears were ringing. But she kept her eyes trained on the group, opening the door a bit wider.

He stepped back out of the door to the room she had occupied. His face was white as snow and pinched as her own.

"Rowdy." This time she spoke his name. Not enough volume. He had not heard. She stepped out into the hall. "Rowdy!"

He pivoted on his high boot heels, swayed, stumbled back, then lunged toward her. "Duchess."

She put out one hand to steady herself against the wall. Weak with relief, she felt a darkness closing in around her. All the men stared at her. Dear Edward Sandron. Revill. And Rowdy, coming toward her in long strides, his legs covering a hall that grew longer until it turned into a tunnel. And then the light at the end winked out.

He caught her as she pitched forward. That is to say, he managed to throw himself forward and break her fall. Somewhat to his surprise, his knees gave way. Instead of his straightening

with her and sweeping her up in his arms, they sprawled in the carpeted hallway together. An instant later, he had managed to arrange them so his back was supported by the wall and she lay across his lap.

The others gathered round them.

Cate stared down at the spectacle at her feet. "Oh, charming. Lovers reunited. She swoons with delight."

"She's fainted." Rowdy groaned. His wound gave an agonizing pang. He looked at the faces hanging above his head, finally finding Cate. "What have you done to her?"

"Oh, ransomed her, bandaged her, fed her, given her a place to rest, things like that." Cate ticked the list off on her fingers. "I'm actually thinking of turning the Lord's Dream into a charitable institution. Maybe a hospital and a mission combined with a little chapel on the side."

Duchess stirred. Her eyes opened. "Rowdy," she whispered. "Oh, Rowdy, you found me."

Regardless of the onlookers, he bent to kiss her. Their lips met. Then her head fell back. She went limp in his arms.

Chapter Twenty

The Darkness Lingers

"Duchess." He hardly recognized his own voice. He could not think what to say except to call her name.

More realistically, Rowdy released the tight rein he had been keeping on himself. He had found Duchess. The violent emotions, the energy he had spent, the wound in his side, all combined to bring him low.

Black spots swirled in his vision, dizziness threatened to overcome him. With almost the last of his strength, he had gathered her into his arms and kissed her. Now he laid his cheek on her forehead and held on tight to his own consciousness until the room stopped swinging.

A minute later, he lifted his head to begin an inventory.

Her face was so pale, her body so still. He had never seen an unconscious woman before. The vibrant life and color that he associated with her seemed extinguished. Her eyelashes were sharp contrasts against her waxen cheeks. A dark bruise with a stippling of tiny scabs crowned her cheekbone. He bent his head to her lips, not to kiss her but to assure himself she breathed.

The others gathered around them. No one said a word as he ran his hand over her. His fingers trailed over the bruise on her face and smoothed her black, tangled hair back from her

temples. He caressed her shoulder and examined one bandaged wrist. A tiny involuntary moan slipped from between his lips as he saw the purple bruises on either side of the white linen.

"I have to get her home," he muttered. He looked up at Edward Sandron, who hovered over him. Through the devil's makeup the dark eyes glowed with concern.

"I'm at your service, old man."

Holding Duchess carefully in his arms, Rowdy tried to rise. An amazed look swept over his face. His eyes widened as he tried again. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Halfway up, he sat down hard, jolting his spine. He winced. Blood oozed through the pad and trickled over Monro Taine's braces.

Sandron put out a hand.

Rowdy shook his head stubbornly. "She doesn't weigh much more than a newborn calf. I can make it."

Revill shot Sandron a meaningful look. When Rowdy rocked up onto his knees a second time, Sandron caught him by one shoulder and Revill put his hands in the middle of Rowdy's back. Together they levered him up.

"Much obliged," the Texan admitted when he stood swaying on his feet, his burden locked in his arms.

"You can bring her back into the room," Cate offered. "Lay her on the bed. We can bring her round before—"

Hardened as she was, she shrank back before the thunderous expression Rowdy trained on her.

They were all looking at her with varying degrees of antipathy. Revill's eyelids dropped to half-mast, his traditional world-weary pose. Sandron, who should have been most tolerant, frowned. Townshend, who had been leering and undressing her with his eyes, turned tight-lipped with disapproval as if she should be taken out and whipped at carttail.

Duchess moaned. Her eyelashes fluttered. Her hand caught at Rowdy's coat.

Cate lifted one bare shoulder. "Oh, all right. Take her on. I would have sent her home in a few hours anyway. She was concerned that the brat might have been worried."

"Pan?" Rowdy's expression changed to one of surprise. "You know about Pan?"

"Of course." Cate's lips curved maliciously. Her black eyes blazed with hell's own fire. "My sister tells me quite a bit about herself."

"Sister?" Rowdy's mouth shaped the word, but he did not say it.

Cate's smile was a mockery of sweetness. "I've even heard about you, Texas. Although I admit, she didn't prepare me for the magnificence of you in the flesh. You've been a busy boy, haven't you?"

Duchess groaned. Her own cheeks flushed and she turned her face into his chest. Rowdy's fair skin flushed bright red.

Cate threw back her head and laughed, laughed at his back as he thudded down the hall, laughed as Baal shook his head at her before he followed Rowdy. When Revill would have followed them, Townshend stopped him.

"I want him arrested," he commanded.

Revill shook his head. "What for? He shot Monro Taine, a known procurer and underworld character. In self-defense, I might add, in front of witnesses, yourself included. MacPherson was wounded when he did it. Getting rid of that piece of filth should earn him the Victoria Cross."

"He murdered Clarence DeCamp."

Cate's laughter had stopped. Listening to every word, she concentrated on lighting a cigarette.

"There's no proof."

"Then get it. The man's a savage."

Revill stood his ground. "Chief Inspector, I can't manufacture proof where there isn't any."

Cate blew a ring of blue smoke between them. "Why not? You peelers have done it before."

As if he had suddenly remembered where he stood, Townshend looked her up and down. "And while you're at it, arrest this person and close this house down."

"Ooooh. I'm so terrified." Cate rolled her eyes. With an exaggerated sway to her hips, she strolled between them and pirouetted. Her skirts spread wide to reveal a shocking length of black stocking and white thighs. "I suggest you check with

your superiors before you issue an order like that. This place isn't called the Lord's Dream for nothing."

Townshend's aristocratic nostrils quivered. Underlying the blue tobacco smoke, he had caught the heady smell of French perfume and woman. Voluptuously, she stretched like a cat—a black cat with white paws and a white face and throat. "Men love to come here," she purred. "Important men. Powerful men. Men on whom the whole country depends. They're exhausted, tense, worried. They leave their troubles here when they go."

"Young woman . . ."

She swayed toward him, a step at a time. Her shoulders gleamed like pearl. He could see into the dark, shadowy valley between her breasts. The perfume emanated from there, he was sure. Suddenly, he realized she was affecting him powerfully.

He cleared his throat and tore his eyes away. Revill was leaning against the wall, his pose of world weariness modified by a slight smile as he watched Cate work. For the first time Townshend wondered if it were a pose.

"Ready, Chief Inspector?" Revill asked. "Or . . ." He left the second question unasked. His eyelids were drooping. His eyesockets showed a dark ring. He had been on the go for over twenty-four hours without rest and almost eighteen hours without food or drink.

Determined to give Townshend short shrift, Cate put her hand on Revill's arm. "Would you like to escort me downstairs, Chief Inspector Revill?" she purred. "I'm sure the cook has begun to lay out the meal for the day. If not, he can have breakfast prepared in a very few minutes. You could eat before you leave."

Revill's stomach grumbled as they descended. He had to clench his fist to keep from pressing his hand over the noisy organ. "Thank you—"

"Absolutely not," Townshend interrupted. "Back to the Yard for us. You've got work to do."

Cate patted the inspector's arm sympathetically. "Some other time then. You've an open invitation."

"Thank you, ma'am." Revill tipped his hat. "I'll look forward to it."

Townshend harrumphed as Charly opened the front door for them and grinned as he bowed them out.

Rowdy took Duchess directly to his room in the hotel.

"But Pan . . ."

"She and Mrs. Nance are being well taken care of. Gill got back and they've sort of moved in with him. I didn't much think they needed to be alone in that house—an old woman and a little girl. Somebody might have made off with them the way they did you."

"You're right, of course." She released her arms from around his neck as he laid her down on the bed. For the first time she saw the wound in his side. She moaned. Her face contorted and she began to weep. Tears brimmed in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks in a solid stream. They were a continuation of the tears she had partially contained and refused to shed at the Lord's Dream.

Blinded by them, she reached for him. Her small fists fastened in his shirtfront. "Rowdy . . ."

"Duchess." He had quite literally forgotten about his wound in his concern for her. Now he remembered it. A bit embarrassed by her tears, he murmured, "It's just a slice. It looks worse than it is."

At the word "slice," she turned quite green. "Please. I didn't know you were hurt. You were hurt trying to rescue me, weren't you?" She pulled him down to sit beside her on the bed.

"Not really," he lied. "That Taine hombre got the drop on me. I had to defend myself."

"Who?" Her eyes looked bigger than ever, black with tears shining in them, and purple smudges beneath them testifying to her ordeal. "Who did you say?"

He kissed her forehead. "Now don't worry your pretty head about who it was."

"You saved me." Her hands slid up his chest and around his neck. She pulled him down to her where she covered his mouth with kisses. They were mere gentle brushes with her lips.

He could feel a flush of embarrassment. He had never had

so many kisses at one time. At least she wasn't crying any longer. "I didn't save you."

"I'm here and I'm safe," she whispered between kisses. "And you were hurt yourself. Please let me help you."

"I'm all right. Just another hunk off my chest." He laughed a little. "I swear I'm going home twenty pounds lighter the way you Englishmen keep carving away at me."

"I'm so sorry." Her hand caressed his shoulder. "Please lie down and I'll take care of you."

The offer was too tempting to resist. "Maybe for just a few minutes," he agreed. He lifted his legs up and stretched out beside her. Prone at last, he gave a great groan as all the nerves in his body relaxed. "No need to take care of me. It's pretty much like that other slice was. Just a long groove. That devil fellow Baal . . ."

"Edward Sandron." She began to make him more comfortable, rising to pull off his boots and hovering over him to loosen his tie.

"That's the one." He closed his eyes as her hands divested him of his starched collar and opened his shirt a few buttons. "He bandaged me up pretty good. Just like before, it bled enough to clean it out and now the bleeding's about stopped. I think the best thing to do is just not mess around with it. For now. I'm just about beat."

She spread a blanket over him and then slipped under it to lie alongside him, her arm across his chest. "You really don't believe in doctors, do you? Oh, but you're a hero. I owe you my life."

"Stop saying that," he told her half heartedly. Much more of this and he'd be grinning like an idiot.

Her lips covered his mouth on the last word. This time she did not merely brush his skin. Her tongue reached out and flickered back and forth across the sensitive slit.

"Hey," he whispered. Suddenly, he was no longer tired. Instead of his manhood lying exhausted and shrunken between his legs, it began to harden. His chest heaved and his rib that should have been aching like the very devil seemed almost forgettable. Certainly bearable.

Her tongue slid into his mouth. Her lips pressed against his. Her hand slid warmly across his chest. "Rowdy."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I—I want to . . ." Her breath shuddered. Her voice trembled. "I—I feel so—grateful."

"Grateful." He patted her with almost his last breath of control. "Shucks, ma'am . . ."

"Yes. And—so much more." Her fingers plucked at the buttons on his shirt. In the work of a minute, her hand slid through the placket onto his warm chest. Her fingers slid through the hair, caressed his smooth skin, found the nipple.

"Duchess," he warned, his voice hoarse. "Lady, you are playing with fire."

"Oh, yes, Rowdy. Oh, yes. I'm so sorry. I know you're tired. I know you're wounded. I shouldn't be doing this. I should get up and leave you alone. You've been hurt for me." Her apologies came in a rush of phrases, each one punctuated by a kiss, a brush of her lips, a nibble along his neck. "Just call me Evelyn," she whispered. "And I swear I'll leave you alone."

"Sweetheart," he moaned. He rolled to face her. One arm slid under her and gathered her against him. Hard. "Stop it! Or it'll be too late."

"It's already too late, Rowdy." She thrust with her body, pressing it so hard against his that she might have been trying to melt into him. To his surprise he felt her tremors begin.

"Duchess . . ."

Her mouth covered his, sucked him, pulled his tongue into her throat. She was a whirlwind of movement, writhing against him, pressing, hugging him hard against her breasts.

A few seconds, a minute. He could not say, but as suddenly as the storm began, it was over. She collapsed, her head fell back against the pillow. "Oh, Rowdy. I—I don't know what came over me."

"Was that what you wanted, sweetheart?"

"I—I think so." She opened heavy-lidded eyes. "I didn't know what I wanted." Her long lashes swept down, then back up again. "You want the same thing, don't you?"

He hesitated. Minutes ago he had wanted nothing so much

as to lie down and fall into a deep sleep. Now he stood tall, aching.

She extricated herself from his arms and sat up.

"You don't have to—" he began.

"Sssh." Her hands fluttered over his body, rested on the lean hipbones pushing up through the fine wool cloth, and then on the evidence of his desire, a hard rod lying up the center of his belly.

He sucked in his breath and managed a resigned smile. Almost too softly for her to understand, he whispered. "If you want to love me, I'm man enough to let you."

"Lift your hips," she whispered. She unbuckled his gun belt, letting it fall on either side. Deftly, she slid the heavy piece from underneath him. She clasped his hips and laid her cheek against the swelling length of him. "You're so tired. And you've been hurt so badly. I was stupid. I should never have let them trick me."

Was it only his imagination or could he feel her breath through his clothes? No. He raised his head. She had moved. Her mouth was open. He was not imagining the heat. His breath hissed from his lips as the sweet ache began.

Her hands moved over him, fumbled with the placket on the front flap of his trousers, found the buttons. In total, aching silence she opened his clothing. Jaws locked, he watched her face.

She stared at him until he shifted nervously and twitched. She blinked. Her eyes, liquid and shining, met his. Deliberately, she clasped him and lowered her mouth to his strutted flesh.

"You don't have to . . ." He closed his eyes. ". . . do that. We can . . ." Head flung back, he gritted his teeth as that most soul-drenching of ecstasies claimed him. While her mouth was still hovering above him, he was wracked by intense pleasure.

"Rowdy," she whispered.

He moaned and shook his head.

She laid her cheek against his belly and waited while the convulsions spent themselves.

When he could speak, he apologized. A high embarrassed color rose in his cheeks. "I apologize, ma'am. I wanted you

too much. I've never wanted anybody or anything so much. I don't usually . . . that is, I never have before. You must be embarrassed."

"Not if you're not." She slipped to the side and pulled his shirt down over his body.

He managed an exhausted chuckle as he turned her so she lay with her back to him, their bodies pressed together spoon fashion. "That was wonderful. But to tell you the truth, I'd be too embarrassed to talk about this if you hadn't done it too."

"What does that mean?"

"It means we were both hot for it," he whispered in her ear. "It means we couldn't wait to get our clothes off or make love like people usually do. We had to have it. Right then." He put his hand over her breast and settled back on the pillow. "Go to sleep. When we wake up, we'll get it done properly. I promise."

But they didn't.

Duchess slept a little less than an hour before she woke and remembered Pansy and Mrs. Nance. The child would be terrified. How could she have been so thoughtless. She searched her memory. Rowdy had brought them to this hotel and put them into the hands of his cousin Gill.

Rowdy's arm had fallen away. He now lay on his back, his breathing deep and a little raspy. She rose creakily, her body aching in places she did not know existed. Beneath the bandages her wrists felt swollen and hot. In the late afternoon light, she saw the mess of stained and ragged clothing that covered Rowdy's side. Despite his assurances, she was certain he was in need of a doctor, or at least Mrs. Nance's able assistance.

For now he could sleep while she found Pansy. But how? She was sure Gill's room was next door, but on the right or the left? Would Pansy and Mrs. Nance have separate rooms? She could see no way to find out but to go into the hall. A quick look at herself in the mirror made her quail. She hoped she found them on the first knock. If she had to go down to the hotel desk, they might throw her out of the hotel.

At the door beyond Rowdy's, she knocked loudly. A

moment's silence then it opened. A slender dark man with handsome features gaped at her.

She gulped and touched her hand to her hair. "Are you Gill?"

"Duchess!" Pan's cry probably was loud enough to bring everyone in the hotel out of their rooms.

Duchess dropped to her knees.

A small tornado dodged around Gill and flung herself into her idol's arms. "Duchess. Are you safe? Oh, you are safe. Oh, Duchess."

Duchess almost toppled over with the force of the little girl's loving. "I'm safe, sweetheart. Rowdy saved me."

Pan covered her face with kisses and tears. "I knew he would, but we've been so very, very frightened. I had to wait. Rowdy said that was the very hardest thing to do. And he was right. It was ever so terrible. Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Come in," Gill begged, swinging the door wide.

Pan thrust herself back and stared at Duchess's face where the bruise had bloomed a violent reddish-purple. Hot tears brimmed over and began to trickle down the little girl's cheeks. "You *are* hurt," she accused. "You're badly, badly hurt. You didn't take me with you and look what's happened."

Gill looked both ways before he took a female under each arm and guided them into the room. Mrs. Nance wrung her hands at the sight of her employer. "Oh, ma'am. Don't you look a sight? What's happened to you?"

Pan spun around to see the bandages. Her face paled. The tears stopped. She closed her mouth and sagged. Without Gill's hand holding her arm, she would have sunk to the floor.

"Pan." Duchess realized something terrible was happening to the child. "What is it? Tell me."

The little one shook her head. Her eyes were fastened on the bandages.

Gill picked her up and carried her to the sofa. There he sat down with her in his arms. Duchess sat down beside her, and Mrs. Nance went so far as to break decorum by perching on the arm.

"What is it, Pan?" Duchess begged softly, reaching out to take a hand. It was icy cold.

Again Pan gave a swift shake of the head. But she hiked herself out of Gill's arms and burrowed into Duchess's. Duchess held her close and stroked her hair. At last she began to weep again, silently, tears sliding down and wetting Duchess's blouse.

"Tell me, Pan. You can tell me all about it," Duchess crooned. "Don't hide it inside you where it can hurt you. You're safe. No one will take you away or hurt you again. I'll never let them. Tell me what happened."

Finally came the little voice, a hoarse whisper drenched in tears. "They were going to sell you, weren't they?"

"Oh, dear." Duchess kissed her forehead. "Yes."

"And you were in a dark place?"

Duchess caught Gill's eye. An unspoken question passed between them. *What should I say?*

He shrugged and shook his head. He had no knowledge of such things. His own life was a walk in the sunlight compared to what these two had experienced.

"They put a sack over my head."

Pan covered her eyes. "And you couldn't breathe and you were scared."

"Yes." Duchess rubbed gently up and down the child's backbone. "Is that what happened to you, Pansy?"

Pan did not answer. She was shivering.

"Poor *niñita*." Gill patted her shoulder.

"I think the thing for us all," Mrs. Nance said briskly, "is a good cup of tea and some of those delicious biscuits with raspberry jam." She rang the bell for room service and then stooped and held out her arms for Pan. "Come to me, dearie. Let's go down the hall and wash those little hands and dry those tears. A nice wash and you'll feel much better."

At first, Pan clutched at Duchess. She gave her head a violent shake.

"Come on, dearie," Mrs. Nance repeated. "I'll bet MacPherson himself can't be far behind if your dear Duchess is here. You don't want him to think you've been crying while he was away. You know he said you had to be brave and wait without crying."

The housekeeper had evidently found the magic words. At

the mention of Rowdy, the little girl heaved a shuddering sigh. Duchess kissed the top of her head and helped her to sit up.

"Did he rescue you?" Pan asked.

"Yes, he did."

"I knew he would." She smiled a watery smile at Gill. The traces of tears made her eyes like stars. "He's like a knight and she's his lady. He's rescued her and then he will marry her and be my father and we will all sail away together."

"Pan," Duchess warned. She lifted her charge down from her lap and passed her to the housekeeper. "Go with Mrs. Nance."

When they left, Duchess stirred uncomfortably. She looked as bad as she had ever looked in her life. She was clothed in old garments that had seen their best days long before she had been stuffed in a coal sack. Her hair was filthy and matted. Her face was bruised.

And she found herself the object of Gill's scrutiny. "So at last I get to meet the famous Duchess."

"And you are Mr. MacPherson's cousin." She extended her hand formally. "I'm pleased to meet you, G-Guil-lermo Sandoval."

"Pretty close." He grinned. "I'm going to shell down the corn and tell you that I'm real relieved."

She raised her eyebrows. "Relieved, sir?"

"Yep. I expected you to come in trailing clouds of gold dust with angel choirs singing hosannahs in the background."

Her mouth dropped open. The last thing she had expected from him was such poetry. She ducked her head as a vivid blush brought color to her cheeks. She laced her hands together in her lap. "Pansy is an imaginative little girl, who spends a lot of time with books. Her teacher evidently has read tales of King Arthur and his noble knights."

He laughed. "I confess I never quite thought of Rowdy as a knight. Neither did his *compadres* back home. We're going to take a long look at Sir Randolph."

"Don't tease him because of a little girl's fancy," Duchess begged. "She's embarrassed him enough, I'm sure."

"Ma'am, if we didn't tease him for that, it'd be something

else. This just makes a nice change." His smile was all that was charming.

Then she remembered this beautiful young man had been imprisoned for nearly a week. The thought made her a little sick. "Rowdy's next door wounded for my sake. Will you come with me and help him?"

Instantly, Gill sprang to his feet. Leading the way, he bolted into the next room. The bloodstained clothing made him curse in a liquid language that must be Spanish. "Would you ask that Mrs. Nance to come in here? And send for some hot water and bandages."

While she was doing that, Gill unfastened the braces and tossed them on to the floor. When she returned, he was removing the padding from the wound with exquisite care. The sight of it made her sick. Dried blood smeared and cracked over the white skin. The edges had not closed properly, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

"It ought to have some stitches," Gill said.

"The hotel can send for a doctor," Duchess told him. "But Rowdy didn't want one. I hope that you can persuade him to change his mind."

"Oh, I don't blame him." Gill bent closer. "Looks like it's closed up pretty fair."

"It is. Just leave it alone." Rowdy opened his eyes and grinned a little weakly.

Gill pretended to cuff Rowdy's jaw. "Playin' 'possum. I might have known." He rose. "Nothing wrong with him, ma'am. He's too mean to kill." He leaned toward her conspiratorily. "What was that you were telling me about him? You should have waited till we got in here."

"How can you both take such a thing so easily?" Duchess hurried to the bedside, irritated and upset. "It's not funny. You could die—of blood poisoning. And you're his friend." She snapped at Gill. "His family. You're supposed to be thinking sanely."

They grinned at her like two little boys.

She was making a fool of herself. Gathering her dignity

around her, she shrugged. "Very well. I've warned you. You're a grown man. Good day."

When the door closed behind her with a calculated click, Gill came to the head of the bed. Arm draped across it, he looked down into his cousin's face. "Are you sure you don't want the doctor, Rowdy. You look like hell."

Rowdy sighed. "To tell the truth, I feel like I've been dragged through a knothole. Help me up."

With Gill's assistance, he undressed and bathed his wounded side.

"Is it broken?" Gill inquired about the rib.

Rowdy took a careful experimental breath. "Don't think so. Maybe cracked a little. It hurts like hell, but not so much as I'm thinking it would if it were really broken."

"What happened?"

In a few short sentences Rowdy told him. "I had to find her and get her back," he ended. "She helped me out of a hell of a fix. And that sweet little Pan. I couldn't leave her alone."

He leaned against the armoire while Gill settled a clean nightshirt over his head. His cousin helped him back to bed, where he stretched out with a great groan.

"Are you sure that Pan's the main reason for all this?" Gill looked at his cousin shrewdly. "Pan's a charmer all right. And someday she's going to have every man within a country mile in love with her, but right now, I'd say you were more interested in her mother."

"Duchess isn't her mother." Rowdy stared with bleak eyes at the ceiling. "She adopted Pan. She made a habit of rescuing girls who'd been kidnapped by this procurer. He'd been selling them to harems in North Africa and such. Except he won't be kidnapping anymore." He looked significantly at Gill.

"He's the one you shot?" Gill guessed. "Good for you."

"Right. I should think so. I should feel like I did the right thing." His voice was low.

Gill put his hand on Rowdy's arm. "But you don't."

His cousin's eyes were cloudy with remembered pain. A thread of panic ran through his voice. "I killed a man, Gill. A little sawed-off squirt who sells women to whorehouses all

over the world. Kidnaps and sells them, and I feel terrible. I've never even seen a man shot before. There was blood all over. So much blood. And he just crumpled. No muscles, no movement. I—"

"You'll have to forget it, Rowdy." Gill interrupted his outpouring. "Now you know what they mean when they say that it's a dirty job but someone's got to do it. In this case you were the man."

"I wouldn't have killed him if I'd had time to think." Rowdy wasn't satisfied with his explanation. "I was just roughing him up a little. He'd already told me who had Duchess. But he found a gun on the floor."

"Then you shouldn't think about it anymore," Gill said again. "He would have killed you if he could. As it was, he creased you. You were lucky. He could have shot up your lung or gotten you in the heart."

Rowdy closed his eyes. "Just 'cause you're right doesn't make me feel any better. I hate what I did even though I had to do it."

"I'll leave you alone to get some sleep." Gill started for the door.

"Wait." Rowdy sat up. "There's something else."

Gill looked interested.

Rowdy closed his eyes. He dropped his wrist over the upper half of his face. "I—I think I ought to marry Duchess."

Gill came back to the bed. "You *think* you ought to marry her? For God's sake, Rowdy. What have you done?"

Rowdy turned his head away. "The usual."

Gill let out his breath in a long slow whistle. "Well, son, if you played the snake, now you've got to play the man."

Rowdy looked up at him, self-disgust written in every line of his face. "I know that. And it wouldn't be a problem if . . ."

"If what?"

"She's wonderful. She beautiful and brave. Mama and Papa will fall in love with her. Hell, I fell in love with her the first time I saw her."

"Then what's the problem?"

Rowdy clenched his fist. Then he threw his wrist off his face

and looked up into his cousin's eyes. "What am I going to do? I can't bring home a woman whose sister is a madam in a whorehouse."

Mrs. Nance accompanied Duchess down the hall for the bath. She helped wash her hair and clicked her tongue sympathetically over the bruises on her body as well as the lacerated wrists. "You've undergone a terrible ordeal, ma'am. Just lie back and let me take care of all this."

Duchess was only too happy to let her have her way. She was tired to the bottom of her soul. Physically, she had been driven over the edge to a depth that would take her body days to climb out of. Mentally and emotionally, the scars were perhaps deeper and could last for months.

For the first time, she had a hazy picture of what Pansy must have endured. She could only admire the little girl's indomitable spirit. Pansy must have buried it all deep inside her for over a year and a half. And it had come boiling out. Would she, Duchess, have it come boiling out of her in nightmares and other terrors? She put the washcloth up against her face, then took it quickly away. It reminded her too vividly of the smothering sack.

She stood. Mrs. Nance wrapped her in a sheet, then guided her onto a stool to have her wet hair combed dry. She was almost asleep when her housekeeper asked the question that destroyed her reverie. "Did you and Mr. MacPherson reach an understanding?"

"An understanding!" Duchess stumbled over the word.

"Yes, ma'am. Pan wants him for her father the worst way. She told his cousin all about it."

Any pleasure Duchess was feeling was quickly washed away. "I hate to disappoint her, but I don't think that's possible."

"Why not, ma'am?" Mrs. Nance's comb never paused in its hypnotic stroking. "He's a gentleman, isn't he?"

"Certainly, he's a gentleman."

"He's an American, true enough, but he's got good manners."

You can tell that at a glance. He's responsible and he cares for you."

Duchess bowed her head. "Mrs. Nance, he hasn't asked me. And I don't think he will."

"Whyever not?"

She hesitated, wondering how much Mrs. Nance might suspect. After a short silence, she found a reason that she could give without incriminating herself. "Because he rescued me from Cate's place, the Lord's Dream. I'm sure he thinks I belong there."

Chapter Twenty-One

Love to the Rescue

The wound in his side ached with a dull throb. Rowdy stared into the darkness while he played at composing his mind and waited for the pain to go away. The hotel was quiet. No horses with steel-shod hooves pulled iron-bound wheels of coaches down the pavement. No late patrons tramped up and down the halls.

He should have been able to sleep. God knew he needed it. But he could only think of her. A couple of doors down the hall, she lay in her bed, undoubtedly sleeping the sleep of the innocent. Except she wasn't innocent anymore. He had seen to that.

He groaned aloud. She had found him when he was lost in a strange city in a strange land, had brought him home safely, had stayed to care for him. And in payment for all that, he had taken her virginity.

"Bastard," he muttered into the darkness. His mother's word "callous" leaped to mind. He tried it as a modifier. "Callous bastard." Of course, he had killed the man who'd threatened her. He could ride away—figuratively—and leave her. She would be safe to go on about her good works.

He rolled over on his good side and punched the pillow under his head. He had been prepared to marry her. Hell! He

had had their marriage all planned out in his mind with a long honeymoon at sea.

On board a cattle boat. Very romantic, MacPherson. That was when he felt he had to. Correction! That was when he wanted to. Now—

All he could think of now was the creature with her black net and lead-white skin. Her black hair and heavily painted eyes. Her scarlet mouth, which constantly dribbled cigarette smoke. And her heavy raspy voice announcing to the listening men that the woman he held in his arms was her sister.

He punched the pillow again and closed his eyes tightly. A full minute and they flew open again.

Perhaps she was pregnant. A child was a distinct possibility. His child. A MacPherson. With a heritage of almost a hundred years waiting for it in Texas. He could not abandon her with a baby. Moreover, there was her own daughter or whatever the relationship was. He groaned again at the thought of Pan. How her hopes and dreams would be dashed! He had it in his power to make everybody happy.

Except himself.

All his life he had differentiated between ladies and women. Ladies did certain things, knew certain things. And one of the things they didn't know anything about was women. Of a special sort. Duchess knew all about such women. He had had a hard time accepting that. He had had to think long and hard to convince himself that she was a do-gooder untainted by the people she worked among.

Then a single revelation had wiped away all his hard-won moralizing.

Her sister was a whore!

Not just an ordinary whore, but a madam of a notorious brothel so foul that she bought kidnapped girls from slime like Taine. He could barely imagine what happened to them in places like the Lord's Dream.

His occasional half-drunken expeditions in San Antonio had taken him to reasonably clean compliant women in big old houses in rundown parts of town. There after a few more drinks accompanied by some laughing and carrying on with

rambunctious friends, he and a woman had gone upstairs and done it. He'd paid her, thanked her kindly, and left with a smile on his face.

London was wicked.

He eased over on his other side and punched his pillow again. At the ripe old age of twenty-four he knew at last what wicked meant. And he wished he didn't. The Lord's Dream and the Devil's Palace embodied wickedness. Brothel and gambling hell, they chipped away at men's souls by catering to their weaknesses.

And Duchess knew about such places. Perhaps she was even a product of them. He couldn't bring her home to meet his mother and father. He couldn't marry her and make her the mother of the next generation of MacPhersons. He couldn't.

His body tightened as he remembered the way she had clung to him and shuddered with need and then with pleasure. Of course, he had done the same with her. But that was different. He was a man with a man's passions. She was a woman with . . . He wondered what.

He rolled over on his back to stare into blackness. He had promised her a long, slow loving. His body stirred in anticipation. He clenched his fists. What was happening to him? His mind was wrestling with a moral dilemma, the consequences of which he would have to live with for the rest of his life. In the midst of this, his body started acting like a randy goat.

He disgusted himself. He had never given any of the other women he had enjoyed a second thought. Why was he suddenly ready at the thought of Duchess?

He pushed himself up in bed. Drawing his knees up to his chest, he bowed his head and took a deep exploratory breath. Not too painful.

He couldn't think about his problems anymore. All he could think about was how much he wanted her and how he'd promised her that they'd make love. He touched himself. He was disgusting. He had only one thought and it wasn't in his head anymore.

He reached for his robe. He needed to go down the hall

anyway. He'd just tap on her door on the way back. If she was sound asleep, a light tap wouldn't disturb her.

The knock at Duchess's door vibrated along every nerve in her body. *He had come. Just as he had promised.* Should she be happy or sad? pleased or insulted?

I won't answer it. I'll pretend I'm asleep.

She clenched her fists. She would not answer. She would not—

Perhaps she was mistaken. Perhaps the person at her door was Mrs. Nance. Some emergency might have arisen—

Liar, she screamed at herself. You know it's not Mrs. Nance. It's Rowdy! Rowdy! Rowdy!

"Rowdy?"

Silence. Then, "Duchess."

She didn't know what to say. She cringed at the thought of saying, *What do you want?* She knew what he wanted. Likewise, she hated to get up and open the door, as if she couldn't wait for him to make love to her, as if she were wanton and whorish and would invite any man into her bedroom and into her bed. The idea repelled her.

"Duchess," he whispered again. "Are you all right?"

She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms tightly around her body. *No.* She was not all right. She was burning with love and desire, aflame with anticipation. She loved him and wanted him desperately. The tall Texan was very much the knight in shining armor that Pan had named him.

Only in this case the knight would not sweep her up on his horse and carry her off to his castle in a distant land. With dragon dispatched, he would sail away and leave her to pine forever for her lost love.

While she wrestled with herself, he spoke again. "Good night, Duchess."

He was leaving. Going back to his room. *Stop!*

She flung aside the covers and dashed to the door. "Rowdy."

As she stepped into the hall, his arms opened wide. She flung

herself into them, practically climbing his body in her eagerness to kiss him.

"Duch—umph—"

Her arms locked round his neck and she thrust her tongue into his open mouth. She was dimly aware of his stepping into her room and closing the door behind them. She lifted her legs and encircled his hips. Indecent. She was. Wanton. With all the innermost secrets of her body pressing hard and hot against his belly. Hardest and hottest, standing tall and rubbing against her with every breath was his rod that throbbed against her. Only cloth—thin, loose garments—separated them.

"I'm so glad. I'm so glad you came," she whispered against his mouth. "I'm so glad."

"Yeah, me too."

Her clinging to him like a limpet to a rock allowed him to use his hands. Her gown was up around her waist in a second. The slipknot of his robe came loose with a quick tug. The garment separated. Underneath he wore knitted cotton underwear with buttons. One big hand fastened in the cotton and pulled. The buttons popped. Duchess's bare skin slapped against his with a force that shook them both.

They were so hot. Everywhere she was hot. Her fingers dug into his shoulders. Her ankles crossed and locked in the small of his back.

He lifted his head to suck in air. "Duchess."

"Yes." She kissed his throat, ran her teeth along the side of his neck to find his earlobe. Nipped it.

"Damn!" He supported her buttocks in the palms of his hands, rippling with the excitement that tiny pang gave him.

"I'm sorry." She drew back instantly. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't know what I was doing. I—"

"No. Oh, no." He kissed her again to stop her apologies. "No. I love it. Every minute of it. Every kiss. It's just . . ." He kissed her again. "I came to make love to you. Remember. I promised. I said I'd take a long time. But if you kiss me like that . . ."

"Oh." She burrowed her face beneath his chin and began to kiss him again.

"Lord," he moaned. "I can't stand any more." He clutched her tightly and lifted her, moving her as if she weighed no more than Pansy.

"Wait!" She stiffened in fear as she felt the engorged head lodge in her opening. He couldn't do that. She would be split. He was going to hurt her. Too late! He had found the opening and thrust upward.

She couldn't have stopped her downward slide if she had wanted to. He filled her to the quick. The power of him made her weak. The scent of him drove her wild. Her breasts were hard and aching for his mouth. She could not get enough of him. She set her teeth in his earlobe.

Suddenly, he was like a column of marble. Except hot blood pulsed under his velvet skin. He thrust up with all the power of his horseman's thighs. One thrust, deeper than ever, hurting her with his length.

She screamed and twisted wildly and at that minute the whole world exploded. The darkness burst into light. Wind rushed about her ears. With exquisite agony her body felt ripped apart and then put back together again.

She slumped against him. He took the few steps that separated them from the bed and fell upon it, where they broke apart and lay panting.

When she could speak, she rolled over and pressed her mouth against his shoulder. "Did I hurt you?"

He chuckled. "That's what I'm supposed to say."

"Oh, I keep getting things wrong." She wondered if the Americans had more rituals associated with lovemaking than the British did.

He pulled her into his arms and she aligned herself with him. "Rest assured. You didn't hurt me. Did I hurt you?"

"It was wonderful."

"You were taking on a lot. That is, I shouldn't have tried something like that with you. You haven't had that much experience."

She could feel herself blushing. Thank heavens for the dark-

ness. She reached up and drove her fingers into his hair, smoothing it back from his forehead. She wished it were light, so she could see the fire of it. "I love your hair," she told him. "It's unique. I've never seen hair so red." She kissed his forehead. "It feels silky and cool."

"Ummm. That feels good." He lay on his back, his feet hanging over the side of the bed. "Listen, lady, you're doing it again. I'm the one who's supposed to be running my fingers through your hair and paying you pretty compliments about the color. I'm supposed to be kissing you. I'm supposed to roll over on top of you . . ."

She gasped as he arched himself over her. The springs creaked when he came down on top of her, his legs drawn up under him, resting his weight on his elbows. Now her legs hung off the bed and he was kissing the side of her neck and nibbling on her ear.

"Now, we'll get the words right. Am I hurting you?" he crooned. His hot breath made her twist. A delightful ache began in the pit of her stomach.

She arched her neck and clutched at his shoulders. "Yes. And it feels so wonderful."

"It does feel wonderful," he agreed, sliding down from her neck to suckle at her breasts. "I can't seem to get enough of you. This isn't supposed to be happening."

She stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing." He slipped his hands under her buttocks. "Believe me. I'm not complaining."

"I don't understand." Was he talking about another ritual?

He lifted his head and whispered in her ear. "I'm ready for you again."

Her blood began to hum in her ears. "I think I must be ready for you too."

"Women are supposed to be ready for men," he explained between kisses. "But men. We can't do it again right away. I don't know that I should be telling you all about this. Am I embarrassing you?"

"No. A little," she admitted. His explanations heated her blood. She pulled her heels up onto the bed. Her thighs came

in contact with his buttocks. She could feel the ache begin to build between her legs.

"Then maybe I can embarrass you a little more."

"What? What are you doing?"

He slipped downward, his open mouth leaving a hot trail. His tongue lapped at her navel, making her squirm. And then he was going farther. She clutched at his hair, but if he felt any pain, he made no sign. His breath was hot in the hair at the top of her thighs.

"Rowdy. Don't. Oh, please. Stop!"

But he didn't stop. His tongue seemed everywhere, laving her, touching masses of nerves. She could not think. That he should put his mouth there. She should be repulsed. She should be fainting with embarrassment. Instead, she was near to fainting with delight.

Not only his tongue but his teeth scored her. She caught at his shoulders, moaning and begging. "Please—please—please . . ."

"What?"

She could feel the very vibration of the word. "I—don't—know."

"Then let me show you." He lifted her off the bed, leaving only her shoulders and head writhing on the sheets. His mouth fastened over her. His tongue rasped the satin skin, then sluiced it with hot warmth. Suddenly, he sucked hard.

She screamed as the sensations rocketed through her body. Her limbs contracted, her toes and fingers curled in ecstasy. He dropped her. While she still trembled, he drove into her. She had thought it impossible to feel more than she felt, but she was wrong. Her body seemed ripped apart, transcending the darkness and the light, to fly into a world where every atom of her body was elevated to incredible pleasure.

"I guess it's about time for me to go," he whispered as he kissed her ear and sat up.

Pale morning light filtered through the lace curtains. They

had lain like the dead, limbs entwined, their faces pillowed in the tangles of her hair.

She moaned and reached for him. Her questing hands found the bandage around his waist. Her eyes flew open. Brown stains had seeped through it, but her inspection revealed no fresh bleeding. "How do you feel?"

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Great. Never better."

She kissed the satin skin over his ribs. "There's no need to lie."

"I actually feel pretty good. Considering what we did last night, I feel wonderful."

She flushed. *Was he having regrets?* she wondered. If he felt stiff and sore, he had only himself to blame. He had come knocking on her door, not the other way around.

He stood and stretched lazily. Her mouth fell open. He was enormous. His shoulders, his thighs, his broad chest, his—She shivered. That—much swollen—had been all the way inside her body. And she had loved every minute of it.

He reached for his robe. "Lock the door behind me. If anyone sees me in the hall, they'll assume I've been to the bathroom." He arranged his clothing and ran both hands through his hair. "It'll be the truth."

"Rowdy." She sat up in bed, the covers held modestly in front of her. "I . . ." She hesitated. She locked away the words she wanted to say. "Thank you."

They were having breakfast in the parlor between the women's rooms. Pan eagerly regaled them with further adventures of knights and ladies. Each glowing description of a knight seemed to include red hair and blue eyes. All the ladies had long ebony hair and eyes like the night.

Duchess blushed pink. Rowdy was frankly red-faced as a knight who looked surprisingly like him performed deed after deed. Mrs. Nance smiled and nodded. Gill laughed until he could barely drink his coffee.

A knock at the door brought the conversation to a halt, and

the entrance of Inspector Clive Revill drove the sunshine from the day.

Revill took in the assembly from beneath his drooping lids. Tea cart. Middle-aged woman of serious demeanor, an unimpeachable chaperone. Young men well dressed, freshly shaved, neatly barbered, smiling, friendly. Little girl with long blond curls, loved and loving. And Duchess, in the proper milieu for the first time in her life, looking as her birth entitled her to look. His disgust at the job he had been sent to do doubled, tripled, quadrupled.

He gave a weak smile and inclined his head to Guillermo Sandoval. "I have good news, sir. Lord Cheviot has withdrawn the charge against you."

Sandoval let out his breath in a long sigh. Rowdy clapped his cousin on the back and cheered while the others offered congratulations.

Revill waited for the expressions of delight to subside before he made his next statement.

"Randolph MacPherson, I've a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Clarence DeCamp."

All talk died instantly. Rowdy's face paled. A muscle ticked in the side of his jaw. Mrs. Nance put her hand to her cheek. Duchess's eyes blazed. Gill shook his head.

They came unfrozen only when Pan wailed. "You can't." She sprang from her chair and planted herself in front of Revill. "He didn't do anything. He's so good. So very, very good. He rescued Duchess. That makes him a rescuer too. He's going to be my father and we're going to America."

Revill's eyebrows flicked upward. He sought Duchess. Her face was a study in angry contempt. And the inspector's eyes dropped. A slow red spread over his own face. In a move uncharacteristic for him, he hunkered down to put his face on Pan's level. "It'll all be worked out," he promised. "I don't believe we can hold him."

"Then why are you taking him away in the first place?" Tears were brimming in her eyes. "We were having such a good time. We were all so happy. And you've spoiled it. Why?"

Duchess put her hands on Pan's shoulders. "Because it would

be too much trouble to act like a real detective inspector, wouldn't it?" she stated flatly. "You would have to actually think and act for yourself. You would really have to get out and work hard, find clues, sift evidence, follow leads to find out who really killed DeCamp."

Revill looked up into her flashing eyes. Hastily, he climbed to his feet. "DeCamp was shot in the back," he said. "Your man threatened him in front of witnesses. DeCamp came to his hotel and an argument ensued, also in front of witnesses."

"That's right." Duchess pounced on Revill's own statement. "DeCamp came to hotel. He threatened Rowdy."

Revill ignored the obvious argument that many a blackmailer has been killed by his victim. Instead he said, "Your man was also seen wearing a gun through the streets of London. Furthermore, as I would have to attest, he is proficient in its use."

"But he didn't do it."

"That's up to the courts to decide."

"No. it's up to you to prove. You haven't even started to look for the real murderer." Duchess could barely contain the fury in her voice. The words fairly leaped from her mouth and slapped him across the face.

"I haven't had time," he countered angrily. "I've been busy rescuing a silly woman who had gotten herself into dire straits meddling in a very dangerous business."

His words failed to cow Duchess at all. Instead she moved Pan gently aside to speak directly to him. "Detective Inspector Revill, you know that Clarence DeCamp was a gambler and a blackmailer."

Rowdy put his hand on her shoulder. "Let's get a few things straight. I'm not denying that I carried my gun. I'd been bush-whacked and stabbed, and I'm pretty sure that DeCamp was the one behind it. He was pretty desperate for me to throw my money his way.

"I'm also not denying that I warned him that if he didn't keep his hands off me and get my cousin out of jail, I wouldn't be responsible for what happened to him. But what I meant was to take him outside and explain how we do things in Texas.

If that didn't work, I was going to beat the living tar out of him. I don't take kindly to the idea that you think I'd backshoot him. I'm no coward."

Revill took in the long speech, reading the young man's character and more. He saw the makings of a fine family before him. The handsome young man from Texas had developed deep feelings for Duchess. Knowing her history, Revill wished that MacPherson would take her away from London forever. She had lived too long in the demi-world of the likes of Clarence DeCamp and Monro Taine.

"No one seems interested in the fact that Monro Taine shot twice," Duchess was saying. "One shot hit Rowdy and tore up his side. He could just as easily have killed DeCamp. If he didn't do it himself, he could have ordered any one of a number of men to do it."

Privately, Revill believed she was right. For a ha'penny he would tramp back to Scotland Yard and shove the badge up Townshend's aristocratic nose. But then someone else not nearly so sympathetic would serve the warrant. He heaved a world-weary sigh. This man was not guilty. He would have been willing to go before the bar of Heaven to testify to the innocence of Randolph MacPherson.

Feeling acutely uncomfortable before their accusing eyes, Revill pulled the warrant from his pocket. Gill rose, his dark eyes somber. Rowdy shook his head and backed away. "I'm not going to accept that piece of paper. You're not going to lock me up in jail for something I didn't do. I haven't fired my gun but the one time."

Revill looked sadly at him. "Where is your gun?"

"I'll get it."

Mrs. Nance called Pan to her side in a soft voice. The little girl looked as if she was not going to obey. Her fists were clenched. Her expression, obstinate. Revill did not doubt that he would have to fend off the child's attack if MacPherson did not go quietly.

Rowdy brought back the gun and holster. Revill pulled it out. Guns were unknown to him, but he could tell it was a very fine one.

"You can see it's been fired the one time," Rowdy told him. "You can smell it. I haven't had time to clean it and oil it."

"Why don't you show me?" Revill suggested.

Obligingly, Rowdy broke it open and pulled out the single empty cartridge case.

Revill was thinking hard. Old Henry Goddard had matched a bullet to a gun nearly fifty years ago. In France and also here in England, he had heard about looking at bullets under microscopes and finding that they looked different depending on which gun fired them. *Maybe. Just maybe.*

"DeCamp's already buried," he said cryptically.

They all looked at him.

"I was just thinking out loud."

They waited.

"I guess maybe I could place you under arrest and then we could ride around for a while before we went into the Yard."

Duchess felt the first dawns of hope.

"What would we want to ride around for and where?" Rowdy asked.

"I think the first place would be to go back to Taine's place and see if we could dig out one of those bullets he fired. Of course, the best thing to do would be to go back to the Yard and get the gun and fire it, but since Townshend has the gun, I don't think that will work."

"Townshend really has it in for me," Rowdy observed.

"What'd I ever do to him?"

Revill frowned. He had to speak carefully or find himself in trouble with lawyers and his superiors if Rowdy had to mount a defense. "He's a political appointee, not a detective. His superiors want results that won't embarrass them. If an American killed the Honorable Clarence DeCamp, youngest son of the late Baron Framington, everyone's relieved, but—"

"—but if the Honorable was killed by somebody in his own circle, then everybody's got a black eye," Rowdy finished for him.

"And the empire is shaken to its foundations," Duchess added bitterly.

Revill shrugged. "After that we'll go to the morgue and have

them dig your bullet out of Taine. A comparison will give us a leg up."

"Come off it, Inspector. What good would that do?" Duchess sneered. "We know they'd be different."

"Yes, but if we could somehow get permission from the family to exhume DeCamp's body and take out that bullet, we'd be able to compare the three and find out which one of you killed him."

Rowdy grinned at Gill. This sounded more interesting every minute. He could almost forget that his own freedom was at stake. "You'd let me ride around with you while you did all that?"

"You'd have to," Revill said. "I can't let you out of my sight."

"Then I'll go too," Duchess declared. "I can't let either one of you out of my sight."

"And me too," Pan insisted.

"Now, Miss Pan," Mrs. Nance said. "Don't be insisting that you should go. They'll be out till all hours. And you'll get sleepy and hungry."

"They'll be sleepy and hungry too," Pan pointed out reasonably. "But I wouldn't complain. Not even if my stomach growled like anything."

Rowdy hunkered down in front of her and held out his arms. "Come here, sweetheart."

Her little face twisted. "You're going to tell me I have to wait, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I'm going to hug you first and tell you how sweet and brave you are." She hung back, shaking her head. "Come on, sweetheart. I don't want to do this, but if I don't I'll have to go to jail. And we'll never get back to Texas."

She ran into his arms and buried her face in his neck. "Will you promise to be very, very careful?"

"I promise."

"And will you promise to take care of Duchess?"

He met Duchess's eyes. "I promise."

Pan let him go and put her arms around Duchess. Looking up into her idol's face, she said earnestly. "He'll take care of

you. You'll be ever so safe I know. As soon as you all come back, we can sail for America."

"Pan." Duchess kissed her tenderly on the forehead. "Please don't say things like that. You're embarrassing us all." Nevertheless, she hugged her tightly. Tears prickled her eyes. How she wanted Pan to be right! "We'll be fine. Inspector Revill will be with us. Just think of it, sweetheart. The rescuers will be working with Scotland Yard."

During the conversation Rowdy pulled Gill aside. "While we're gone, see that the arrangements are made for those cattle. *Comprende, Guillermo*. I don't want to stay here one minute longer than I have to."

"*Sí, primo hermano.*" Gill hugged him hard. "*Buena suerte.*"

Rowdy took his gunbelt from Revill and slung it around his hips.

"Wait just a minute." The inspector looked alarmed. "You're under arrest."

Rowdy grinned. "The gun is evidence. Right."

"Yes, but—"

"It's easier to carry this way."

"This place doesn't look any better in daylight," Rowdy commented as the coach pulled across the entrance to the narrow smoke-blackened alley. Since it was indistinguishable from dozens of other alleys along Victoria Embankment near Waterloo Bridge, he wondered how Revill had known where to come.

Edward Sandron, Rowdy's own guide of a couple of nights ago, had admitted off-handedly that he had been born on the streets and knew where to find almost everything old and dirty in the city. Now Rowdy wondered about Revill. In the western United States, particularly in Texas, outlaws frequently took jobs as sheriffs, hired by the citizens to clean up their towns. Perhaps the English, too, found it practical to "set a thief to catch a thief."

"Perhaps you should wait with the driver," Revill suggested to Duchess.

She shook her head. "I want to see it. Besides, I might be able to help. You're looking for something very small."

"What you want?" The Egyptian sprang out of Taine's seat and hugged the wall of the small room.

"Just settle down," Rowdy told him. "We need to get something, and we'll be gone."

"Everything gone. Everything," the Egyptian insisted, his eyes shifting from side to side. His voice quavered. His hands shook. "Policemen come early this morning. Take everything."

"Townshend's been busy," Revill commented to Duchess.

"I'll bet he didn't find any money." She studied the Egyptian narrowly. "Taine must have made a fortune over the years."

The Egyptian continued to grovel, shaking his head and moaning. "No. No. Very poor. Very poor man."

"He probably had a house in West Kensington and his own personal broker on the Exchange," Duchess told Rowdy confidentially.

The Texan sat on the desk and sighted along his index finger at the spot where he had shot Taine. His left hand felt along the groove in his side. He turned round and pointed the same finger toward the wall behind the desk. "Should be right up there."

The light was terrible, but they managed to find the hole in the wall. Rowdy pulled out his penknife and dug into the wood. "Got it."

It dropped into his hand. A misshapen piece of lead.

"What can we prove from that?" Duchess stared at it. She could feel her scalp prickling. This was all that was necessary to kill a man. If she looked at it closely, she could probably see traces of blood on it.

"Not too much," Revill admitted. "But we can compare the shape and the weight with the bullet coming from MacPherson's Colt. Then if we can get the third bullet from DeCamp's body . . ." He pulled a small white envelope from his pocket. Bending over the desk, he wrote the date and the source of the

bullet, as well as whose gun had fired it. Sealing it, he slid it carefully into an inside pocket of his coat.

Duchess swallowed. "We're going to dig up a body."

Rowdy put his arm around her. The prospect didn't thrill him either. Once he left this country, he was never coming back. "Let's get out of here." He nodded to the Egyptian. "Much obliged, fella."

A flash of white teeth and the man sat back down at Taine's desk. "I tell you the truth," he called.

His words halted them in their tracks.

"The truth." Revill pulled out his notebook and strolled back to the center of the room. "I'd like to hear a little truth."

The Egyptian licked his lips. His eyes flickered from one to the other. "I not get in trouble."

"Not for telling the truth," Revill promised.

"Taine never gave order to shoot DeCamp. You, yes." He pointed a long finger at Rowdy. "DeCamp wouldn't pay the four hundred pounds until you pay him. So Taine said scare you. But not to shoot. Cut." He made a slicing motion across the throat. "Scare. But not kill. No money from a dead man."

"What about Duchess?" Rowdy asked. He glanced at Revill, who blinked irritably. "Just for my information."

"She . . ." The Egyptian looked at her from under his black eyelashes. "She cause problems. Taine want everything smooth." He gave a shrug. "She bring a good price."

Duchess longed to ask how much Cate had paid for her.

"But Taine never gave order to shoot DeCamp." The Egyptian shook his head. "Not with four hundred pounds owing."

Revill closed his notebook and touched the brim of his hat. "Much obliged, as the American says."

"You remember?" the Egyptian called. "I not get in trouble."

Revill ushered the others out ahead of him. "Not for telling the truth."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Morgue

When the coach pulled up in front of the morgue, Rowdy took Duchess's hand. "Why don't you wait here? This is bound to be a real nasty business. There's no sense in your putting yourself through it."

"I agree wholeheartedly," Revill said. "The morgue is no place for a lady. Highly dangerous. Sights and smells to trouble your dreams." He cleared his throat. "Might make you run mad."

Duchess smiled coolly. "Do they drive you mad, Inspector?"

"Well, no, but you're a lady."

"He's right," Rowdy agreed. "We won't be long."

She transferred his grip until she was holding his hands instead of him holding hers. Her gaze was earnest. "The more witnesses there are to these proceedings, the better. I can testify as to where that first bullet came from. I actually saw Inspector Revill put it in his little envelope and label it with his name and the date. Your word won't be accepted since you'll be the one on trial. But mine will. If I see this one removed and the inspector put it in another envelope and label it, I'll be able to swear to the authenticity of both of them."

Rowdy looked at the inspector, who nodded reluctantly. Her generosity touched him deeply. She was putting herself in

harm's way for him. He wanted to kiss her, but with Revill looking on, he had to content himself with squeezing her hands.

Then he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. "Use this to cover your mouth and nose. This place is bound to smell bad enough to make a buzzard puke."

With Revill leading the way, Rowdy and Duchess entered with shoulders touching. Duchess had to clamp her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering. The temperature inside the building must have been twenty degrees below that of the London streets. Pale gray walls reflected very little light, and dark gray floors echoed every footfall.

A dapper gentleman rose from behind the office desk. Dressed in spats, stripped morning trousers, and cutaway coat, he extended his hand to the inspector. "Revill. Such a surprise."

Revill glanced down at the hand. His mouth twitched. Instead of shaking it, he pulled his envelopes from his coat. "Spillsbury. We need a bullet from a corpse."

Spillsbury looked beyond him at the couple. His eyebrows rose in surprise. Private citizens entered a police morgue only rarely to identify a fresh corpse. Moreover, females generally left that ordeal to male family members or friends. He frowned, then his face brightened. "Is this the famous American?"

Rowdy ducked his head and stared at a spot of the floor. He had overdone the "hide-in-plain-sight" business.

Revill looked uncomfortable. "We're in a bit of a hurry. Have you performed the autopsy on Monro Taine as yet?"

Spillsbury stepped past Revill and extended his hand to Rowdy. "I've read about you, I believe."

Rowdy grasped the hand and shook it. "Hope it's not too bad."

Spillsbury smiled maliciously at Revill. "Depends on who's telling it."

Revill heaved a weary sigh. "Mr. Randolph MacPherson, may I present Mr. Bernard Spillsbury, the coroner for the city of London."

Rowdy could not help his reaction. He glanced down at the palm of the hand he had just shaken.

Spillsbury laughed. He directed his attention to Duchess. "And this young lady . . ."

"Is his friend," Revill said curtly.

Spillsbury nodded. "I see." He returned to his desk. "No autopsy yet. Cause of death not in question. No money. No relatives. I was just about to send the order to dispose of the body."

Revill nodded. "Then before you do, we need the bullet."

"Now, Revill," the coroner chided. "You know I can't do that without proper orders."

"If you're going to dispose of the body, who would know or care?"

Spillsbury grinned. "I'd need some recompense for risking my life. You know how it is. Cutting like that is dangerous. The corpse isn't fresh."

Duchess swallowed hard to keep her breakfast. She looked past the men to the double doors. Her confidence was waning by the minute.

Revill shook his head. "Spillsbury, you're a disgrace."

Rowdy pulled his wallet from his pocket. "Let's get this over with," he snarled. "How about a fiver, as you chaps say?"

Spillsbury held out his hand palm up. "A fiver's just the ticket."

Rowdy slapped the bill into the man's hand with unnecessary force.

The stench of decaying flesh lay beneath a pervasive and nearly suffocating odor of carbolic acid solution. Immediately upon entering the autopsy room, Spillsbury lighted the gas under a huge copper distillery vessel. Humming softly to himself, he donned a black leather apron that covered him from midchest to ankles and a pair of leather gloves that reached almost to the elbow. Within minutes a spray of carbolic acid solution filled the air.

"What the hell's going on here?" Rowdy exclaimed as the stuff surrounded him. He began to cough. His eyes watered and stung.

Duchess kept the handkerchief tight over her nose and mouth and remained against the wall by the door.

Spillsbury went behind a wall of screens at the far end of the room. In a minute he wheeled out a gurney with a sheeted corpse. Wrestling the heavy rolling table right and left and back and forth, he positioned it directly in the path of the spray.

From a drawer in a metal cabinet, he carried a tray of knives and set them across the corpse's shins. "I may be just a county official, but I read," he explained loftily. "The man who had this job before me died when he cut himself. Not me." He waved his gloved hands through the spray. "That's Lister's own formula. They don't use it in hospitals any more because it's hard on live people, but here"—he patted the corpse's sheeted thigh—"nobody ever complains."

He selected a rusty-bladed scalpel and held it too in the spray. "A bullet, you said?"

"Right."

Spillsbury glanced at Duchess with a sly smile. "Maybe you'd want your friend to leave, Mr. MacPherson."

Duchess heard him and shook her head. Her eyes were fixed on a spot of the floor. Her face was almost as white as Rowdy's handkerchief.

"Get on with it," Rowdy grunted.

Spillsbury shrugged and whisked the sheet back from the corpse, baring it to mid-thigh. It was naked. Glaring at the coroner, Rowdy stepped between the body and Duchess.

Monro Taine had been shot in the chest. Drilled, as a Texas Ranger might have described it. The bullet had broken his breastbone and angled down into the soft tissue of his intestines. From the first slice, Spillsbury began to complain bitterly. But he never stopped working. He dug and dug while foul odors rose. Finally, he found it. Both hands in their gloves were soiled to the wristbone when he tossed the bullet into a pan of carbolic acid.

"There! There's your damned thing."

Rowdy had long since stopped looking. Revill had never looked at all. Now the detective inspector reached into the acid, swished the slug back and forth, and pulled it out. He weighed

it in his hand. "It's a .45 caliber. Almost the same weight as the one from the Webley," he remarked. "But different. Definitely different."

He pulled a second envelope from his pocket and marked it carefully. "Duchess," he called.

Determined to walk steadily, she came and stood beside him. "Here are the two bullets," he said formally, holding up the envelopes. "This, a .455 caliber from the gun of the deceased Mr. Monro Taine dug from the wall of his office after it passed through the body of Mr. Randolph MacPherson." It was sealed on the site and marked Exhibit A.

"This is a .45 caliber extracted from the body of the deceased Mr. Monro Taine after being discharged from the gun of Mr. Randolph MacPherson. I now place it in this envelope and seal it. This is Exhibit B."

"Yes, sir." She looked at them both.

He tucked both envelopes away into his pocket.

Her curiosity got the better of her. She glanced at the table. Monro Taine's slight body lay naked upon it. The skin was blue gray. The coroner had laid it open from mid-chest to halfway down the belly. In order to find the bullet in the abdominal cavity, Spillsbury had pulled the intestines out of the incision and laid them in a pile on the table.

Duchess made a desperate sound.

Rowdy caught her before she hit the floor.

Revill watched with some curiosity as Rowdy MacPherson cradled Duchess across his lap. The young man had brushed her hair back from her forehead and loosened the top buttons of her high-necked blouse. Otherwise, he had made no effort to revive her.

"She's shocked," he told the inspector. "She shouldn't have come along on this trip, but I didn't see any way of keeping her back."

"No," Revill agreed. "She was determined. And why do you suppose that was?"

Rowdy's telltale color appeared in his cheeks. He fractionally

tightened his grip, then relaxed. He shifted uncomfortably on the seat before he looked up. "Probably because she feels beholden."

Revill's weary gaze met the young man's. "That might be one reason. But I rather think that's not the only one."

Again, Rowdy shifted his weight. The coach rolled slowly along. London's busy streets were filled with all manner of private vehicles, cabs, vans, pushcarts, and people, people, people. The noise of their passing seemed to din inside the coach and to reimpress him with how much he longed to be on his way home to the Texas prairies.

He looked down into Duchess's still face. "I think she's sleeping," he said at last. "I think that's good."

Revill refused to let the subject die. "Especially since she's been getting so little sleep at night."

This time Rowdy's eyes blazed. "If you've got anything to say, Inspector, maybe you'd better just spit it right out."

Revill folded his arms across his chest and heaved a sigh. "This young woman doesn't have anyone to protect her. No one will speak for her. So I shall assume that roll. What are your intentions, young man?"

Rowdy flushed. Little did Revill know that he was only one in a string of persons who had inquired about his intentions toward Duchess. "I—I promised her I'd get rid of *Monro Taine* for her. So she'd be safe."

Revill's mouth turned upward in a slight smile. "And you did a very good job of it. I must congratulate you. In fact, all London owes you a debt of gratitude."

"And—er—I've thanked her for saving me."

"That's most gracious of you." The smile disappeared, to be replaced by sarcasm. "And what about doing the right thing—as you Americans say? Let me speak bluntly. A gentleman who takes advantage of a young lady of good family—"

"Now, just a minute. I might have taken—that is—we were . . ." He fumbled into silence, then rallied with a show of belligerence. "It was mutual. And where'd you get this good family stuff anyway? You know her family," he muttered. "Her sister's a whore."

"Ah, yes. Cate. Hecate the witch, or so she loves to tell people. I thought you'd taken that mischief maker seriously. Let me be blunt. Cate is a whore. And the daughter of a whore. She now runs the brothel as her mother did before her. But whether she's Duchess's half-sister or not is anybody's guess. They may—I say may—share the same father. Cate believes they do, and Duchess, being generous to a fault, will not entirely disown her."

"Well, who is Duchess's family? Where'd she come from?" Rowdy's forehead bunched into a ferocious frown. "I've got a family, you know. I can't take just *anyone* home to my mother and father."

Revill snorted contemptuously. "And I thought you Americans were supposed to be so democratic."

"Listen, here—"

"Why don't you ask her about herself?"

"I have. She won't tell me anything."

Revill looked down at the sleeping girl. She looked hardly older than Pan. And at the same time there was a cast to her face, a hint of pain around the young mouth that never smiled. "Then perhaps you should observe everything we do here in this investigation. Then start one of your own. For example, why don't you investigate a little more closely at the Lord's Dream? Perhaps you'll find something there that will clarify it all."

"But why won't you tell me?" Rowdy pleaded, holding Duchess in his arms as if she were a part of his body. "My God. I want to know. I don't want to make a mistake."

Revill looked tempted. He actually plucked at his lower lip and regarded Rowdy from under his heavy lids. Then he shook his head. "No. I can't. Because—she doesn't want me to. You aren't the only one who's proud, you know. Furthermore, polite, well-bred people don't air their dirty linen in front of strangers. I'm sure you have a few skeletons in your family whom you'd just as lief forget." He paused to wait for the reply which never came. "There, you see. You'll have to become a detective inspector and find it out for yourself. Only don't wait too long. I know you're eager to return to America."

"You can bet your bottom dollar on that," Rowdy muttered.

"Exactly. And who could blame you? You've been treated badly by all and sundry. Still there have been some bright spots. It would be a shame if you went away without ever knowing what you had left behind." Revill looked at him significantly. Then he glanced out the window. "It's a bit early for the gamblers to be gathering at the Devil's Palace. Shall we stop for an early supper?"

A demon brought Edward Sandron to properly greet Duchess and her escorts. "You're looking well, my dear." For the benefit of the patrons in the salon, Baal swept his crimson-lined cape aside and bowed over her hand. A thin line of white bandage flashed between the sleeve of her suit and the cuff of her black leather glove. Sandron caught her eyes before he pressed his lips to it. "A kiss won't make it well," he murmured for her ears only, "but it won't hurt."

"Thank you, Edward."

Beyond her he saw Revill. His heavy black eyebrows rose. The role of Baal enveloped him like the wings of his cape. "Ah, Inspector. Come to experience the delights of the Devil's Palace. You're welcome. Just don't expect to reform any sinners. We're all irretrievable here. You might even find a few policemen among our devotees."

"I'm sure you're right." From beneath shuttered lids, Revill surveyed the casino with its demon waiters and croupiers. "However, tonight we're here on business. We'll appreciate your help."

Sandron looked down into Duchess's face. "Whatever the Devil's Palace has to offer is yours."

He caught Rowdy's frown. "Ah, the American." A tall man himself, he seldom had to look up at anyone, but the six-foot-six Texan in Stetson hat and boots with two-inch heels topped him significantly. "No need to scowl, old sinner. I'm happily married and the father of two."

His remark made Revill cough.

Rowdy's frown deepened. "We're here to talk to Francis, Lord Cheviot. Need a favor of that hombre in the worst way."

"Ah, the Earl of Audley's son. Such a poor gambler, but much more relaxed now that Clarence DeCamp's no longer a permanent fixture at his shoulder." Baal was all business. "Yes, he's here with a new friend."

Rowdy looked up sharply at the ironic tone in Baal's voice, but the dark face gave nothing away.

"They're in a private room rather than the main salon. I'll show you." Cape billowing behind him, he led the way along the edges of the gambling hall through an archway draped in crimson velvet with heavy gold tassels. Rowdy remembered his introduction to the place. How amazed he had been! And how naive.

He could not doubt that in the final analysis DeCamp had died because of his addiction to the games that went on here constantly. He saw the avid faces hanging above the roulette wheel, the blackjack tables, the card games. He felt no desire ever to turn another card.

"Coming, MacPherson."

He realized he had halted at the archway, mesmerized and repelled by the scene. "Right behind you."

Cheviot was laughing. Rowdy realized that for the first time he was seeing the handsome face unfrozen.

At the sight of Revill and the Texan, however, the cheerful countenance instantly changed to a sober pale one. Cheviot set his champagne down and gripped the arms of his chair.

The detective inspector came into the room, his eyes scanning the startled faces. He had no use for this strata of society. And he knew exactly how Baal regarded them. They were prey. Their money which they gambled and drank away with such earnest concentration was bread and butter to all the people who worked in his establishment as well as the hundreds of deserving poor helped by his wife's charities. Revill felt no calling to raid the Devil's Palace and destroy it on moral grounds.

Tonight his purpose was to exonerate an innocent young man and possibly to find the identity of a murderer. "Cheviot."

All eyes turned as one to the viscount.

The man next to him, a much younger companion, put his hand over Cheviot's. "Francis, we're your friends," he said softly. "You don't have to go anywhere with him."

MacPherson's jaw dropped as his eyes roved over the other men in the room. More than half of them wore makeup. Their cheeks and lips were rouged, their brows drawn in. One with a heart-shaped patch on his upper lip rose and advanced on Rowdy, screwing a monocle into his left eye in the German manner.

Rowdy scowled a warning at him that elicited a moue.

"Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot," Revill demanded loudly.

The hostility in the room was palpable.

The monocled one admired Rowdy's broad shoulders and exceptional height. "You can stay if you want to," he offered, sidling a bit closer. "Is this one a friend of yours, Francis? I'd like to meet him."

Ignoring the others, Rowdy stepped forward and spread his big hands over the green baize table. He leaned forward. "Cheviot, you owe me this one," he said. Anger and disgust and not a little desperation made his voice deeper. It electrified them all. "Gill and I have been turned every which way but loose by you and DeCamp. Now it's time you set the record straight."

Cheviot's shoulders quivered as Rowdy's words fell on them like blows. He wrapped his hand around the glass of champagne and drained it. Then he mastered himself. He set the glass down and rose. "Excuse me, gentlemen. I believe I do have business with Mr. MacPherson."

The handsome youth beside him touched his sleeve. "Do you want me to come with you, Francis?"

The viscount smiled down lovingly. "Not unless you want to, Marcus. I rather think I have to do this myself."

"Our records show that you claimed DeCamp's body," Revill said.

"That's right." Cheviot sat at a table made up of the inspector, Rowdy, Duchess, and himself. With his index finger he rubbed

at a dark knot in the woodgrain on its polished surface. His mouth trembled as if at any minute he might burst into tears.

Watching him, Rowdy had it in his heart to feel sorry for the man. "I know this is tough," he said. "Clarence DeCamp was your best friend."

Cheviot looked at him measuringly. Then he moved to another spot and rubbed at that.

Duchess smiled faintly at Rowdy's naiveté. More than ever, she realized she had never met a man like Rowdy MacPherson, and given her profession and station in life, she would probably never meet another.

"We wouldn't have disturbed you," Rowdy went on, "but this is real important. We . . ." He glanced at Revill, but the inspector remained sleepy-eyed. Evidently, since Rowdy had begun the conversation, Revill expected him to continue. "I've been accused of murdering DeCamp."

Cheviot looked up for the first time. "You?"

Rowdy nodded. "It looks bad for me. I admit. You know I had words with him in public two or three times. He was shot. I've been waving my gun around."

Cheviot dropped his gaze again. "Actually, I hadn't remembered. I don't remember very much about any of that. It was all—unpleasant. I hadn't thought about it. Clarence is dead. That's all I know."

"Did you know anything about Clarence's dealings with Monro Taine?" Duchess asked.

The viscount pronounced the name silently. He looked into her dark eyes. "No. I never heard of him."

"He was an underworld character. He's dead now. But we think he might have killed Clarence."

For the first time Cheviot appeared interested. "Did anyone see him do it?"

At this point, Revill entered the conversation. He pulled out his notebook and found a spot. "There are no witnesses to Mr. DeCamp's murder. We only know that he was shot in the back on a dark street. A policeman heard the noise and came to investigate. He heard footsteps racing away in the darkness. He gave chase but never caught a glimpse of the culprit. He

gave up and was returning to his watch when he stumbled over the body in the fog."

"I wouldn't have shot him in the back," Rowdy grumbled. "Even if I was going to shoot him, I'd have given him a fighting chance."

Cheviot studied his white hands now clasped together in his lap. "You didn't just come here to tell me all this. You have to want something. I don't see how I can give you anything. I have nothing to give you."

Rowdy glanced at the inspector. Now that the time had come, he felt like a conspirator plotting a particularly unsavory scheme.

Revill cleared his throat. "The fact is, you can. And it looks like you're the only one who can. Since you're the one who collected his body."

Cheviot's head shot up. "What's that got to do with anything? I told you Clarence didn't have any family."

"We'd like your permission to exhume."

"Exhume?" The viscount pronounced the word as if he had never heard it before.

"An autopsy was never performed," Revill explained. "There was no question about the cause of death. You came the next day to pick up the body and it was released to you."

"I buried it at Audley," Cheviot said half to himself.

Rowdy's face twisted in sympathy for the man. He looked at Revill. "This is too much to ask."

Duchess caught hold of the Texan's hand. "It's not too much. Clarence can't be hurt by this. If it's done quickly and efficiently, no one will ever know. Don't forget. Your life could very well depend on what we find."

Cheviot looked curiously from one to the other. "Why would you want to look at Clarence's body? There wasn't a mark on it except for the bullet hole."

"We don't want to look at the body," Revill said. "We want to take a look at the bullet."

The viscount shrugged. "A bullet is a piece of lead."

"But each one is a different size depending on the gun that fired it. My gun is a .45 caliber Colt. Monro Taine's gun was

a Webley. It fires a .455. If the bullet in Clarence's body is from a Webley then—"

"—that will prove that Taine shot him," Cheviot finished. His eyes wavered round the room then back to Revill's face. "But what if it isn't from a Webley? Or from a Colt? What if it's from an entirely different gun?"

Revill resumed his half-lidded pose. "Then the chances are good that the murder will never be solved. If MacPherson or Taine didn't kill him, then we would have to make a new list of suspects."

"Which could comprise half the gamblers in London," Duchess remarked. "He might have been your friend, Lord Cheviot"—she put a special stress on the word "might"—"but he had plenty of enemies."

The viscount looked from one to the other. His mouth curved in an ironic smile. "I'll help you. Let me just excuse myself to the others. We'll leave tonight. Some of them might want to come with me, for moral support."

"Wait!"

But he was up from the table and hurrying from the room. Revill rolled his eyes. He swore baldly without an apology to Duchess. "It'll be a bloody three-ring circus," he predicted.

But he was not correct.

Within the hour only two coaches rumbled through the night over the road to Audley. In the first coach Cheviot rode with a bottle of brandy and his special friend Marcus James. James had insisted that he come along because it was his coach and also to aid his dear friend in case of trouble.

In the second coach Revill rode backward, a circumstance that made his head ache and his stomach pitch and roll. He accepted his discomfort as a means of staying alert and awake. Across from him Duchess curled against Rowdy. Both of them were asleep.

At a particularly rough stretch of road, Rowdy roused and sat up carefully so as not to disturb Duchess. "You've really

gone the distance for me," he said to Revill. "I don't know how I can ever pay my debt to you for this."

"It's part of the job," Revill assured him, yawning behind his hand. "I'm sworn to see justice done. What was about to be done to you was injustice."

Rowdy would not let the easy explanation rest. "Townshend's liable to nail your hide to the barn door."

Revill smiled. "If by that expression you mean he'll call me up on charges, you're wrong. He's got to have good men to ensure his job. We relatively honest ones are hard to come by. Not too many years ago some of the most respected were convicted of bribery. He needs me."

Rowdy rubbed his eyes and looked out the window at the moon sailing along beside them. "It's the same in Texas. The Rangers are a special bunch. And you're right. Honesty is hard to come by. I'm sure glad you'll be all right."

They swept round the brow of a hill. "I remember this territory," Rowdy said. "We're getting there."

He curved his fingers more intimately around Duchess's shoulder. She murmured something as her fingers sought and found his hand in his lap.

Rowdy looked down at the pale oval of her face. If Revill had not been watching him, he would have pressed a kiss on her forehead. He felt a wave of love that threatened to unman him. He pressed his lips together and looked out the window. "We're getting there."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Ghosts of Burke and Hare

The exhumation of the body might have occurred in the early days of the nineteenth century when Burke and Hare, the resurrectionists, as they called themselves, raided the churchyards for newly buried bodies to sell to medical students.

A chilly wind blew among the crosses in the family churchyard at Audley. With carriage lanterns the "new resurrectionists" found their way to the fresh grave. Their coats and cloaks flapped and billowed around them. Instead of the short, flat wooden daggers favored by the bodysnatchers, Rowdy and Revill wielded iron spades. The noisier tools bit more deeply into the newly piled earth and flung huge amounts of it to one side with appropriate crunching sounds.

Marcus James cast a longing look at Cheviot, but the viscount seemed to have forgotten his presence. Like a deacon in some puritanical sect, he stood with hands clasped behind the cross that marked DeCamp's grave. The ride had left him cold sober. His face was white in the yellow lantern light.

An owl hooted from Audley's tiny belfry.

Huddled in her coach, Duchess looked up at the stone and slate spire. A quarter moon poured water directly onto the point. Shivering, she returned to watching the silhouettes shifting back and forth in front of the lanterns.

Rowdy's spade struck first four feet down. The grating thud sent shudders up everyone's spine. Another turn of the earth and Revill's knocked hollowly against the head of the coffin. In less than five minutes the box was uncovered.

Prying with their spades on either side of the lid, they managed to shift it ajar. Then Rowdy hooked his big hand underneath it and tipped it backward out of the grave. All except Cheviot retreated from the miasma that rose to engulf them. He stood like a rock, as though ready to read a sermon.

Revill and Rowdy returned to look down. That which had been Clarence DeCamp was scarcely recognizable, even though he had lain in the earth slightly more than a week. The gray skin was already like parchment across the bones of the face, and the blond hair seemed bleached of color in the yellow light. The eyes were sunken deep in the skull. One eyelid had fallen open to expose a dead white cornea. The lips had peeled back from the teeth which thrust out in an obscene grin.

"God." Marcus had come to stand on the other side and look down. "Is that what we all come to?"

"Just about," Revill said grimly.

The longer Rowdy looked and smelled, the more nauseated he became. The odor did not seem to dispell in the air. More and more foul stinging filled his nostrils. He could imagine them as wisps of fog and steam rising except in colors. Yellow for sulfur. Green for bile.

Finally, despite his best efforts, he lost control of his stomach. He bolted across the burial ground. Around the corner of the church out of sight and hearing of the others, he vomited. He returned a couple of minutes later, white-faced. "Sorry."

No one cared to comment. Revill had donned his gloves and tied a kerchief over his nose and mouth. "Put on your gloves, MacPherson, and help me turn him over."

"I say," Marcus protested, looking hastily at the silent viscount. "Is that necessary?"

"He was shot in the back," Revill explained. "We'll have to follow the path of the bullet in."

While they wrestled the body out and up onto the lid of the coffin, James retreated to the carriage to make use of the bottle

of brandy. Rowdy looked up at Cheviot standing like a monument and watching every move. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I know he was your friend."

Audley's son acknowledged the apology with a short nod. He stared at the back of the corpse as Revill pulled aside the coat, vest, and shirt that had all been purposefully slit up the back to facilitate dressing. The skin on the back of the body was black.

Rowdy gasped. "What happened to him? I thought you said he was shot."

"He was." Revill reached up and caught the edge of the lantern to pull it closer. "Spillsbury explained it to me. All the blood settles to the back while the body's lying on the slab. It congeals there."

"Oh, God," the Texan moaned.

"Here's the hole." Revill found the charred circle about an inch in diameter, black against purple-black.

Just get me through this night, Rowdy thought. *I'll never leave Texas again. I may spend the rest of my life in San Antonio.*

"Hold the light closer." Revill unwrapped a pair of tools, a long thin metal rod used by battlefield surgeons to probe for balls in living flesh and a pair of forceps. He sent the Texan a meaningful look. Then clamped his teeth over his bottom lip. The rod slid easily into the hole in no-longer-living flesh.

Cheviot shuddered. Rowdy closed his eyes and prayed he could hold the light steady.

Revill's face seemed sculpted in purest white marble. Not by the flicker of a muscle did he betray the slightest emotion. He might have been sitting at his desk beneath the picture of Queen Victoria writing reams of tiresome reports.

Fortified by brandy, Marcus ventured back to lean over Rowdy's shoulder. The sight of the corpse's back with the silver rod sticking out of it made him draw back.

Mercifully, the probe found the lead almost immediately. Revill slid the forceps in alongside it, followed it down, and easily plucked the bullet out. When he raised it into the light,

the observers could see his hand begin to shake. He rose unsteadily and stepped back.

Their mission accomplished, Rowdy pulled the clothes back into place. He wanted nothing so much as to cram the body into the coffin and slam down the lid, but he was conscious of Cheviot standing in judgment over the proceedings. He thought he could see the sparkle of tears on the viscount's pale cheeks.

Forcing himself to take special care, he grasped the shoulders and gently lowered the body into the coffin. He arranged the limbs and tried to cross the hands over the chest. Unfortunately, they would not stay, so he had to wedge them in beside the body. A final moment, a glance at Cheviot, who nodded shortly, and Rowdy slid the lid into place. With the spade he began to refill the grave.

To his surprise, Marcus James picked up Revill's tool and helped him to restore the earth as it had been. The man's long hair fell over his face as he labored. The icy wind caught his cloak and whirled it. He began to murmur as each load of clods fell on the coffin. Bits and pieces of his words reached Rowdy.

"... blot out my transgressions. Wash from me mine iniquity..." Cheviot's voice joined in, strong, borne on the wind.

Rowdy thought he recognized the words from a psalm, but he could not remember the number of it. The owl spread its wings and swooped out of the belfry. Its black shadow froze Rowdy with his spade sunk in the earth. Down. Down. It landed out of sight. But he could hear its wings flapping and imagine the death struggle of some unlucky fieldmouse.

"... that the bones which thou hast broken..."

James turned another spadeful of earth.

"Hide thy face from my sins, and..."

From inside the carriage Duchess pushed open the door for Revill and handed him an empty envelope. He dropped the bit of lead into it. Then he returned the tools to their wrapping and stripped off his gloves, leaving them inside out. He pulled the stub of the pencil from his notebook and labeled the third bullet.

"This, from the body of the Honorable Clarence DeCamp, deceased, fired from an unknown gun. Exhibit C."

He put the envelope into his pocket and hung his arms over the window of the coach. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes. And I think you should be too. You've done a fine job. I thank you. I truly thank you."

He looked almost too exhausted to nod. "You're welcome."

"Finished." Rowdy came carrying the spades and one of the lanterns.

Lord Cheviot came with him. The clouds had boiled across the moon and the wind carried the moisture of an approaching storm. "Shall we all take pity on our coachmen this wretched night and wait out the storm in Audley?"

Rowdy looked toward the great house. He did not like the idea of staying there, but they were all clearly exhausted. He nodded. "Much obliged."

In the main salon, they gathered. Clive Revill, Detective Inspector from Scotland Yard. Rowdy MacPherson, Texan suspected of murder. Duchess, an enigma, a cipher, a rescuer from the London streets. Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot, heir to a centuries-old name. And Marcus James, Baronet, who shadowed Francis like a protective nanny.

Revill pulled the three envelopes from his pocket and laid them on the table. "Would you like to make the determination, Duchess?"

"Why her?" Marcus wanted to know. He cast a jaundiced glance at the only female present.

The inspector shot him a quelling look. "Because she's the one who brought this all about. She's the one who insisted that it be done. And challenged me to do it." He stepped back. "Duchess."

She was almost too tired to think, but his defense of her brought a fresh shot of adrenaline to her blood. She squeezed Rowdy's hand and walked to the table. With steady hands she opened the envelope containing Rowdy's .45 bullet and the envelope containing the Webley .455 bullet. She placed each of them side by side on their envelopes. Revill's labeling was

clear on the white paper. Then she pulled the third bullet from its envelope.

All bent forward to study them.

"Oh, I say," Marcus burst forth. "It isn't a bit like the others."

Revill looked at Rowdy. "You're more familiar with guns than I am, MacPherson. What is it?"

Rowdy picked it up and turned it to the light. He weighed it curiously in his hand. "Not a bullet from a pistol. In fact I doubt that this thing ever had a jacket on it. It's a ball. Maybe ten-gauge. Very heavy. This probably came from a shotgun."

As the significance of his pronouncement dawned on him, he felt the hackles rise on the back of his neck. The hunting guns. The day Clarence had challenged them to a shooting match. He glanced toward the door. Down the hall in the billiards room where the the big duck guns were also kept.

He placed the ball squarely in front of the viscount. "You're the expert on English hunting guns, Lord Cheviot. Correct me if I'm wrong."

Francis looked at the pellet of lead, his face working. Tears brimmed in his eyes. He shook his head. "You're not wrong," he said in a choked voice. "It's from a duck gun."

The tears streamed down his face. Marcus came to put his arm around the viscount and murmur in his ear. "Don't take on so. You'll make yourself ill. Poor Clarence. We all know how much you loved him." Overcome by emotion, he leaned over and planted a tender kiss on Francis's cheek. "Don't cry anymore. You'll make yourself ill."

He might have been a woman comforting another woman. Or a lover comforting his love. Heads together, Francis allowed Marcus to lead him out of the room.

The silence grew in the room after they left.

What was Revill thinking? Rowdy wondered. *Did he suspect the son of the Earl of Audley? Would he make an attempt to accuse him? arrest him?*

At last Revill cleared his throat. He replaced the three objects in their respective envelopes. "Well, I should say that takes care of that, MacPherson. We'll return to London tomorrow. I'll present the evidence to Townshend. He should be satisfied."

"But you don't know who the murderer was," Rowdy objected.

"No." Revill shook his head ponderously. "And I'm unlikely to find out. The trail stops here, I'm afraid. We have eliminated the two guns belonging to the prime suspects. We have no other suspects . . ." He paused. His eyes met MacPherson's. ". . . whose guns we can check.

"We don't always solve our crimes, MacPherson. But at least we will have the satisfaction of knowing that an innocent man will not pay for a crime he did not commit."

Duchess caught hold of the back of the nearest chair. Her knees were almost too weak to bear her weight. "Then that's all. There's nothing for it. Townshend will have to let Rowdy go."

"Yes. Thanks to you, he's free. You've managed another rescue, milady." Revill bowed to her formally. "He's free. And I'm for bed. I suppose a butler or someone could show me the way to one. Otherwise, I'll just stretch out on the nearest chairs."

"Not just yet." Rowdy threw his arms around Duchess and swung her up into his arms. Before she could do more than squeal, he kissed her long and hard. "I've been wanting to do that all evening." Letting her down but keeping his arm around her, he dragged her over to Revill and hugged him too and pounded him on the back. "I'll never be able to thank you enough. I imagine I owe you my life."

His lightning change of mood left them gasping and smiling. A whirlwind unleashed, he turned from clapping Revill on the back to catching Duchess about the waist and flinging her up in the air to the full stretch of his arms. Her shriek of surprise was drowned in his own bellow. "*Eeeee-haw!*"

The full-throated and fully terrifying rebel yell brought the servants on the run.

"Beds!" he yelled to the first man to stick his head in the door. "Beds for the three of us. And food. Food! Lord! I'm so hungry I could eat a horse, or maybe that big ol' bull of Audley's. Hell. Just bring us a plate of cold beef and some bread. We'll make do."

Later the servant led the three of them up to three separate rooms in the guest wing.

"Where're Lord Cheviot and his friend sleeping?" Rowdy asked audaciously.

"They are sleeping in the family wing, milord," the butler informed him.

"Great. Glad to hear it." Rowdy grinned at Revill. "That way they won't be disturbing us. I don't imagine they're going to be doing too much sleeping." He shot a more circumspect glance at Duchess. "Probably drinking and playing cards and such."

She smiled. "I'm sure."

He left her at the door with a goodnight kiss. "I'll wake you in the morning." He put his hand on Revill's shoulder. "First light all right with you."

Revill nodded. "I suppose we can sleep on the way back to London."

"Sure enough. I don't see much sense in hanging around here waiting to visit with these folks. And to tell you the truth, I feel real uncomfortable. Like I don't belong. Know what I mean?"

Revill knew precisely what Rowdy meant. "Whoever wakes first will wake the others." With that, the detective inspector went into his room and closed the door.

Rowdy lingered in the hall. His blood was humming through his veins. Despite the long hours without rest and the demands he had put on his body in the past few days, he felt exhilarated. Later he would consider all that he had seen and learned. And he would think about the third bullet. For now, he wanted to celebrate.

He looked at Duchess's door. Did he dare? He walked to it and rested his knuckles against it. Just one tap. If she didn't answer, he would go to his own room.

One.

Leaning against the door, Duchess lifted her eyes to heaven in thanksgiving. He had knocked. He wanted her. One more time. Once more for memory. She snatched the door open. Smiling a wide and welcoming smile, she greeted him with

shining eyes. Before he could speak, she caught his hands and pulled him into her arms.

And into the shadows. At her request the servant had lighted a bright fire in the fireplace, but the hangings of the bed clothed most of the room in darkness. She rose on her toes and took his cheeks between her hands.

He turned his head to kiss her palm. "I wanted to—"

But she held her hand against his mouth. "Don't. Don't say anything. We have tonight. You're happy. You're free. I want to share that with you. I'm so glad you came."

He breathed deeply and formed the word against her palm. "Free."

She could feel a sweeping wave of tenderness. He was so beautiful and so good. She counted her blessings to have known and loved him. And acknowledged that her heart would be scarred forever when he sailed home to Texas in America.

Then she took her hand away and put her lips to his. He was a taste she would never forget. And that she would have to hold tight to and remember. Like a starving woman, she drank from his lips.

"Duchess," he muttered against her.

"Don't," she whispered again. "Don't talk. Don't say anything. Just love me. Please, Rowdy. Please."

He lifted her against him. As if they wore no clothes, she imagined she could see his smooth white skin and every muscle that rippled beneath it. He laughed softly, his breath tickling her neck. Then he lifted his head to the ceiling and whirled around and around until her head was spinning. Still laughing, he carried her to the bed and laid her down.

He did not wait to undress her or him. He unbuckled the gunbelt and hung it over the head of the bed. Then he tore open their clothes and brought them together in a smooth swift lunge that made them one.

Their union was a celebration of his freedom that left them satiated and exhausted beyond thought. Both had barely enough strength to divest themselves of their outer garments before they lay down in each other's arms and fell into a deep sleep.

"Good morning, MacPherson."

Rowdy whirled around. The last person he expected to see before seven in the morning was his host. "Morning, Cheviot."

The viscount looked as if he had not slept at all. Dark circles underlined his eyes. A stubble of golden beard gilded his cheeks and chin. His shirt was without a collar and unbuttoned halfway down his chest. His shoulders hunched as if against a blow. "Bound for London, are you?"

"As quick as the lady can get dressed."

Taking each other's measure, the two men gravitated around the edges of the morning room. "And soon after that you'll be leaving for America?"

Rowdy nodded warily. "I imagine Gill is loading those cattle on a boat right about now."

Cheviot sighed. He pushed aside the lace curtain to stare out over the green lawn to the fields beyond. "Whose cattle did you finally buy?"

"Sir Charles Stowers's. Prime bunch of Herefords, so Gill tells me. Clean strong lines. Hand-raised. No throwbacks or dwarves." Rowdy's voice turned accusing. "I haven't seen them yet. And that really upsets me. I was the one sent to buy the cattle, but I had to spend my time getting out of this mess."

"I'm truly sorry about what happened." Cheviot spread his hands, then let them drop limply to his sides.

Rowdy grunted. "Are you?"

Suddenly, the viscount swung around and threw a punch into the wall. Another and another with both fists. A couple of cracks appeared in the plaster at the point of impact. The lead-glass panes rattled in the window. Then he turned away, cursing fervently, and locked his fists together, pulling them against his chest. The pain brought tears to his eyes.

"You don't understand," he whimpered.

Rowdy crossed his arms over his chest. "Come off it, Viscount. My papa didn't raise any stupid boys. I'm here to tell you that I do understand. And you make me sick."

Cheviot shook his head violently. He bent nearly double over

his fists, then straightened. The tears trickled down his cheeks. "You're so quick to judge. Marcus is right to call you an unsophisticated savage."

Rowdy's mouth curled in contempt. "Don't call me a savage. I've heard just about enough of that. You think I mean you make me sick because of what I'm pretty sure is going on between you and James?"

Cheviot blinked. "Well, don't you? I mean—we're—that is . . ."

Rowdy dropped his arms and stepped closer until he was only inches from the viscount's face. "Just so long as you don't mix with me and mine, your sexual preference is your own business. I'll tell you what makes me want to wipe the dust of this place off my boots *muy pronto*."

Cheviot fell back a couple of paces from Rowdy's intensity, but the Texan followed him and caught him by the lapels. The viscount squawked and batted ineffectually with his wounded hands.

"I can't prove a damn thing," Rowdy grated. "And remembering the Honorable Clarence DeCamp the way I do, I don't intend to try. But I also remember those triple-barrel sporting guns you're so proud of. Ten-gauge shot from the top two barrels and a rifle barrel underneath that shot a big bullet. Now if I took Revill into that billiard room and showed him those guns, what would we find?"

"Stop! Let go!"

"Would we find that one of them had been fired real recent like, and maybe put away without cleaning?"

Cheviot's eyes widened. His mouth gaped like a fish.

"And if we fired that one into a bale of hay, would the chunk of lead we dug out be exactly the size of the chunk of lead that Revill dug out of DeCamp's body?"

"Shut up! You don't understand."

"The hell I don't."

"He was blackmailing me," Cheviot sobbed.

"That doesn't surprise me one bit. You're most likely going to be blackmailed again, you being your papa's only son and all and him probably wanting grandchildren."

"That's right." Cheviot stopped struggling. He blinked at the tears. "You do understand."

"No, sir. I do not." Rowdy gave him a shake. "Even the fact that he's dead wouldn't make me so mad. Hell, he was meaner than a poison pig. But someone . . ." He gave another shake that rocked Cheviot's head on his shoulders. "*Someone* drilled him in the back. Some"—shake—"dirty"—shake—"little"—shake—"coward . . ." When Rowdy let go of the velvet lapels, the viscount fell to his knees and clutched at his throat. ". . . shot him in the back. He never had a chance. And in Texas we don't do stuff like that."

The viscount's face contorted. From the floor in front of Rowdy's knees he stared up the towering length to the angry, flushed face. Then he hung his head.

Rowdy ran a finger round his shirt collar and straightened his coat on his shoulders. "From here on in, we're square. You let me dig up the body and prove my innocence. I thank you for that. But that's as far as it goes. From now on until I can get out of the country, I reckon you'd better stay out of my sight."

The door opened behind them. Cheviot scrambled to his feet as the butler took in the scene with wide eyes. He gulped. "The inspector and the lady are waiting in the entry way for Mr. MacPherson."

"Much obliged." Rowdy turned on his heel and strode out.

Revill insisted on being driven directly to Scotland Yard to present the information to Townshend.

"I don't think there'll be any trouble," he said wearily. "But just to finish the thing off properly, please wait until you hear from me."

"Don't make it too long," Rowdy cautioned. "If Gill's got our passages booked, I can't wait."

Sitting beside him, Duchess felt every word like a icy shard in her heart. She clasped her hands together tightly to still their trembling.

As Rowdy helped her down in front of the hotel, Charly

pushed himself away from the wall farther down the street and came to meet her. "Brought a message, ma'am."

She nodded and accepted the envelope. Opening it, she read it and then shook her head.

"Bad news?" Rowdy asked.

She hesitated, then shrugged. "Tell Cate I'll be there as quickly as I can, but there are some things I must take care of."

Charly looked undecided. "Maybe you'd better come soon. I've been hanging around here all day."

"I understand. Tell her I'll be there as soon as I can."

"You're back." Pan embraced first Duchess and then Rowdy. "I was so disappointed when I got back from school and you weren't here. I was very worried." She cocked her head up at Rowdy. "I don't like this staying behind and waiting."

He scooped her up in his arms. "Nobody does. But now we've got it all taken care of. And I'm free as a bird."

She put her arms around his neck. "That's wonderful. I learned where Texas is today."

Her innocent remark sent prickles up and down his spine. "You did?"

"Yes. Miss Stokes showed me on a map." She wrinkled her brow and closed her eyes, picturing the map in her mind. "Our boat will sail all the way across the Atlantic Ocean and down around the tip of Florida and into the Gulf of Mexico." She opened her eyes. "Is that right?"

"Pretty good," he praised. "Except it's Florida. Not Florida. Means the same thing though. Flowers."

"Florida."

"We decided that you'd probably land in Houston."

"That's pronounced 'Houston.' It's a man's name. Houston. And we'll dock east of there in a place called Galveston." He shifted his weight, bracing for the next question.

Her expression was serious. "Rowdy . . ."

"Pansy. I think it's time for us to collect Mrs. Nance and go back to the apartment. We haven't been home in so long."

Duchess reached up and took the little girl out of Rowdy's arms. "Give me a big hug, please."

Pan obliged and Duchess let her slide to the floor. "Run and find Mrs. Nance and get your things."

"But—"

Duchess took the child's face between her hands. "Please don't argue, Pan," she begged. "Please don't."

Pan's eyes flew from one to the other. Uncertainty and then fear flickered across her face. She threw a pleading glance at Rowdy, then hurried into the bedroom.

Duchess pasted a wide smile on her face and extended her hand. "I'll bid you goodbye, Randolph. I hope your stay in London hasn't been altogether unpleasant."

He took it with an air of helplessness. "It's had its moments, er—Evelyn."

She withdrew her hand. Her color was high and she could feel tears prickling in the back her throat. He was so handsome and so dear. And she would never see him again. "You needn't wait for us to leave. We're quite capable of finding our way back to the apartment. I'm sure the doorman has a line of cabs waiting."

Rowdy shook himself mentally. "Not on your life. I'll see you home."

"No!"

She threw the word out with more force than she had intended. "That's not necessary. You need to find your cousin and help him make arrangements for your sailing. I assure you—"

"I'll see you home," he said evenly.

Her temper exploded. "Don't. Just don't. I don't want you to. It will be easier for us both, if we say g-goodbye here. You saw Pan. She'll be upset enough. If we ride home alone together, we can—that is—I can"—she swallowed hard—"calm her and console her."

He pressed his hand to his forehead. "Damn it, Duchess."

"Please." She raised her hand. "Don't say anything more."

"You don't understand. I'm trying to work my way through this." He flung away from her and began pacing the floor. "I

don't know what's going on here. I've never cared for anyone the way I care for you. I—I think I love you."

She spun around, turning her back to him. "Why did you have to say that? How can you say that?"

He put his hands on her shoulders, but she shrugged them off. He clenched his fists. "It's the truth." His voice was hoarse and low. "I swear it's the truth."

"How can you say that. You must know that—that . . ." She pressed her fists into her stomach. "You're tearing me apart."

He turned away. "I'm tearing myself apart."

She spun and hit him in the middle of the back with her fist. "See what you've done. If you hadn't started this, you'd be gone and I could get myself together before Pansy comes back. Now go. Just go. *Go*."

He hunched his shoulders. "If I just knew—"

She dashed to the door and jerked it open. "What do you want to know? That I love you? I do. I do. I do!"

He closed his eyes. A multitude of expressions flitted across his face, none of them happy ones.

She saw them all and her spine turned to chilled steel. "But it's not enough, is it? That wasn't what you wanted to hear. And I won't tell you what you want to hear. Not now. Not ever. If just as I am, I'm not good enough for you and your Texas family, then *love* isn't enough." She slapped the door facing with her hand. "Now will you get out of here? I have my little secret hopes and dreams too. And you're trampling on them."

"My mama and papa back in Texas—"

She stamped her foot. "Just go. You're a big man. You can go down the hall to the lavatory, and when you come back, we'll be gone. You can be sad for the evening. Drink a couple of bottles of brandy. In the morning your cousin can roll you onto the ship in a handcart. In a week, you'll have forgotten all about us."

He bowed his head. Without another word he strode out.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rowdy Rides Again

Revill presented the three exhibits to Townshend. In the light of all the work he had done, he allowed himself a bit more of a show than usual. The episode in the graveyard in retrospect seemed more like an adventure with himself as something of a hero. He wished he could recount it all. He and the cowboy digging away. The viscount standing like a priest before the cross.

With a little twinge of regret, he laid the envelopes side by side on the chief inspector's desk. He placed each of their bullets on top, and below each he placed a card describing the relative weights and characteristics.

"So you see, Chief Inspector, there's no doubt that neither Randolph MacPherson nor Monro Taine murdered Clarence DeCamp. The bullet from the dead man's back was too large to come through the barrel of either of their pistols."

In stubborn disbelief, Townshend studied the bullets. Eyebrows knitted in a dark scowl, he held each to the light and turned them every which way. The evidence of his own eyes angered him at the same time it confounded him.

He wanted to close the case with a conviction and execution. With the publicity the Texan had received, *The Times* would carry the story. His name would be brought to the attention of

his superiors. Instead, he could see it all slipping away. "Damn. What am I going to tell the Home Office?"

Revill heaved a weary sigh. "I suggest you tell them that DeCamp met his death at the hands of person or persons unknown."

"But damn it all, Revill. A peer of the realm has been murdered. We have to find a killer."

"Not such an important peer," Revill remarked in an off-handed manner. "Lord Framlingham is dead. DeCamp's own family didn't even claim his body for burial."

Townshend shot him a malignant look. "Nevertheless . . ." He lifted the third bullet again, weighing it in his palm. "Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"Absolutely. And I have three witnesses to attest to the source of that bullet. I dug it out of DeCamp's body last night."

Townshend dropped it as if it had burned him. He rubbed his hand on his pant leg and stared at his fingers to be sure they were clean. "My God. Where?"

"At Audley. His friend Francis Tillingham, Lord Cheviot, buried him in the churchyard there."

"And Cheviot witnessed this—this . . ."

"Exhumation. Yes. He was with me every moment of the time." Revill saw his opportunity. He cleared his throat. "He saw me open the coffin, lift out the body, turn it over—"

Townshend waved his hand weakly. "That's quite enough, Revill." He dropped into his chair and leaned his forehead against his palm. "I don't think I want to know about this."

"Probably not, sir." Revill was disappointed.

Townshend tried one more time. "If neither Taine nor MacPherson killed DeCamp, who did?"

Revill leaned over the three bullets and touched Exhibit C, the largest one, with the tip of his blunt finger. "I have it on the word of an authority, the son of the Earl of Audley"—he paused to let the name register with his superior—"that this is a bullet from a sporting gun." He lowered his voice. "Therefore, I suspect that a member of DeCamp's own class shot him."

"A peer! My God!"

Revill allowed himself a small secret smile as he drew himself

up straight. *Case closed.* "I doubt we could find the gun, but we could try. Just say the word, Chief Inspector, and I'll compile a list of peers with whom DeCamp had business dealings. I can get search warrants for their country houses and shooting boxes, confiscate the guns—"

"Have you lost your mind? Go into the country houses of members of the House of Lords and confiscate their sporting guns?" Townshend thrust the bullets back into their envelopes with shaking fingers. He slapped them into Revill's hand. "Take those things and file your report—before you leave for the night."

"Yes, sir." Revill walked out with a spring in his step.

Rowdy slammed into his cousin's room, his face like a thundercloud.

Alarmed, Gill rose. "Bad news, *primo hermano.*"

"The worst." Rowdy sent his Stetson spinning and looked around with the air of a man searching for something to smash.

Gill raised his hands. "Don't hit me. Tell me. Do we need to hightail it for the Border?"

Rowdy shook his head. He walked to the bureau, jerked open the top drawer, then rammed it closed again. "No. That's all over. The bullet didn't match."

Gill came over and clapped him on the shoulder. "*Muy bueno.* That's great. Then we can leave whenever we want to."

"Yeah. Whenever we want to." Rowdy stomped back to the center of the room. "Don't we have any liquor around here?"

"Bottom drawer."

"Why didn't you say so?" Cursing under his breath, Rowdy hunkered down and rummaged through the drawer. When he pulled out the bottle, he stared at it belligerently. "Is this all there is?"

Gill raised his eyebrows. "How much do you want?"

Rowdy uncorked it and turned it up to his mouth. His throat worked as he took an enormous swallow. The raw liquid literally knocked him over. He sprawled on the floor coughing.

As Gill stared at him in amazement, he drank again, his eyes

watering. Finally, he set the bottle down. "I want enough to get unconscious."

Gill resumed his seat and looked at him appraisingly. "Why don't you marry the girl?"

"Damn it, Gill, this is none of your business." Rowdy lifted the bottle and gauged the amount that remained. He set it down without drinking and wiped his upper lip. "She's—I don't know what she is. She could be anything."

"So."

"Her sister . . ." Rowdy waved the bottle wildly.

"Forgive me while I remind you, hombre, that we share a common ancestor who took a whole heap of Tejano scalps."

Rowdy climbed to his feet. He stalked to the window and pushed aside the curtain. It had started to rain. He hated this country with a passion. "That was different," he snarled. "This is a woman we're talking about here."

"Oh, the sex makes all the difference in the world?" Gill raised his arms and locked his fingers behind his head. He closed his eyes as if trying to remember. "I think on your side of the family, you've got a regular Anne Bonny who stole a schooner right out of Boston harbor. And of course, on my side there's the Diamondback. She was a real heller with a gun, so I've heard. Burned down a whorehouse in Matamoros."

"Goddammit, Gill, I'm not talking about the past. I'm talking about a woman to bring home to my mother." Rowdy took another drink of whiskey. He scowled at the bottle again, then set it aside. "I can't—"

"Do you love her?"

Rowdy closed his eyes. His whole body sang and ached from loving her. She was good as an angel, beautiful, brave, intelligent. She would make a wonderful mother for his children. She commanded the respect of important men. He had no doubt that Detective Inspector Revill had pursued those bullets because she had challenged him to. But for her, Rowdy acknowledged that he might have been dead or in prison awaiting a summary trial and a swift execution. She had performed the ultimate rescue and demanded nothing in return for her services.

But gratitude had little to do with his feelings for her.

Impressions garnered from other people flooded his mind. Foremost was Pan, with eyes the color of Texas bluebonnets, telling him how Duchess rescued children. And Revill had seemed proud to assume the roll of father. And Ivory Shires had chaperoned her everywhere and quizzed him about his intentions.

But there was also Cate, with her white limbs and red nails and black taffeta dresses and net hose. And cigarettes, blowing smoke like a dragon. Laughing, switching her hips down the hall of the Lord's Dream—a brothel so foul that Monro Taine had deemed it a fitting revenge for Duchess's interference in his affairs.

Duchess's interference.

"Do you love her?" Gill demanded again.

"Yes." The word hissed out on a shuddering sigh.

"You're not just feeling grateful."

"No."

"Then you're a damn fool if you don't take her home with us." Gill paused. His mouth quirked up at the corner. "That is, if she's willing to go. She's got a lot a good friends here in London. Might not want to be taken off to the wilds of Texas. Especially with a big galoot like you. You must know, *primo hermano*, she is *gente de razon*."

Rowdy shot him a swift look. "You don't know that."

"I'm not blind." With his hands he shaped a feminine form in the air. "*Perfección*."

"That's just the way she looks," Rowdy groaned. "She could be—"

"Use your brains, *amigo*. You've been around good breeding all your life. The best horses, the best cattle, the best people. Remember the old stud horse of El Rincon. He was just a mustang. But what a mustang.

"What's the sense with finding fault with old San Leon because they found him running wild. He was perfection and it showed in every line of his body. You've found perfection. Don't try to talk yourself out of it because you found her running wild. That lady's got breeding to her fingertips. She's

the best. Maybe there are some outlaws in her line, but they haven't left their mark on her."

Rowdy closed his eyes. "You make me feel ashamed."

"You ought to feel ashamed. But what you're going to feel is sorry. You've struck gold here in London and you're about to leave it on the ground for some lucky guy to carry off."

Rowdy put the cork back in the bottle and started stripping. "I need to take a bath and shave and change out of my grave-digging clothes. Will you go down and order that gray horse out of that livery stable. I need him at the door in fifteen minutes."

"You've got it," Gill promised. When his cousin dashed for the bathroom, Gill thrust his fists above his head. "*Perfección!*"

Mrs. Nance's eyes narrowed in disapproval when she found Rowdy standing at the door, hat in hand. She glanced over her shoulder even as she tried to push him away from the door. "Duchess has gone out."

"*Are you sure about that, Mrs. Nance?*" He let his voice rise until it boomed to the rooms upstairs. "*Are you sure she's not here?*"

A moment's silence was followed by a shrill cry. "Rowdy!"

Pan appeared at the head of the stairs clad in a white nightgown. Her face was red and swollen from crying.

"Now you've done it, sir," Mrs. Nance said sharply. "This poor child's cried herself sick. We had to keep her at home today."

Rowdy brushed past the housekeeper and strode to the foot of the stairs. "What's this? What's this? What are you crying about?"

Pan refused to look at him. Instead, she wrapped her arms around the newel post and rolled her forehead against it.

He pulled a sad face. "I'll bet you don't want to go America with me and Gill. I thought you wanted to be my little girl and I was looking forward to being your father, but—"

Still keeping her forehead to the wood, she looked at him out the corner of her eye. "Don't say that. You're going back

to America without us. Duchess said you'd always be our friend, but—"

He put out his hand. "Pan. Please come with me to America."

She lifted her head. Her whole body quivered with hope. "Do you mean that?"

He came up the stairs. "I sure do."

"Rowdy!" She launched herself into his arms. He caught her and held her tight, pressing his face against hers. She dissolved into a storm of weeping.

His own eyes wet, he patted her and stroked the back of her head. Turning, he saw that Mrs. Nance was dabbing at her cheeks with her apron. "Where's Duchess?"

The housekeeper put on her most disapproving face. "She got a message from that house and she went over there."

He nodded. "I was with her when she got it."

Pan pushed her head away from his neck. Although she had been sobbing, she no longer looked like a whipped puppy. A light shone in her little features. "That place is *bad*. I begged Duchess not to go, but she said she had to."

"Well, I'll just have to go and bring her back."

"Can I go too?"

He considered it. "You can go if you really, really want to. Or"—he paused for effect—"or—you can stay here and help Mrs. Nance pack everything that you and Duchess want to take to America with you. It's going to be quite a job because you won't be coming back for years."

Pan kissed him on the cheek and hugged him hard. Her next words surprised him not a little. "I really don't want to go to the Lord's Dream," she declared. "I've been there and it's awful, terrible, horrible. Do you think you'll have any trouble getting Duchess?"

The very maturity of her answer made him realize how much he loved this child as well as how right he was to be taking her and Duchess with him. He kissed her on the forehead. "I don't think so."

She smiled. "Then you can put me down. If you think you'll be all right, then I'll stay here and help Mrs. Nance pack."

He turned to the housekeeper. "We should be back in an

hour or two at the most." On his way out the door, he muttered for her ears only. "If we're not back by dark, send for Detective Inspector Revill."

Cate paced the room like a tiger, black skirts swirling, a perfect cloud of blue-gray smoke following her. Duchess remained seated in the chair she had taken when she had entered. Apart from polite exchanges, the women had said nothing to each other.

Finally, Cate stubbed out the cigarette. "Aren't you curious?" she rasped.

Duchess hesitated. "Should I be? I didn't come to see a body. I came to be with you."

The answer stopped Cate in her tracks. She squinted through the smoke, speechless for several seconds. Then she looked away. Sucking in a deep breath, she stalked to the sidetable and poured herself a glass of liquor. "Want any?"

Duchess shook her head. "When did he die?"

"Yesterday. I knew he was dying the day before. That's when I first sent Charly for you."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there when he came."

Cate shrugged. She seemed suddenly subdued, as if Duchess's concern for her had thrown her off balance. "It's all right. I'm all right. He's nothing to me. It's not like I'm grief-stricken or anything."

Duchess looked around a little uneasily. "Does Lady Clarice know?"

"She does if she can read. I sent a telegram." Glass in hand, Cate dropped down on the chaise longue. Her careless swirl of skirts left her long white legs bare to mid-thigh.

"And—er—Lady H."

Cate's laugh was a bitter croak. "She wouldn't give a damn. I haven't seen her in two months." She took another drink. From a pocket in her skirt, she pulled her cigarette box. From it she withdrew another thin cheroot and struck a match off the striker with practiced ease. "She's gained weight. Like a bloody whale. And let her hair go gray."

"Will you have a funeral?"

Again the hoot of laughter. "I probably should with that charity mission preacher delivering the eulogy and all the whores in attendance. Do you want to see the body?"

Duchess stiffened. "I—I . . ."

"Come on." Cate sprang up and caught Duchess by the arm. As before Duchess was surprised by the strength of Cate's grip as she was propelled out the door into the hall. "I really don't want to see him."

"Well, that's just too damn bad. I specially had Nessie fix him up."

Duchess hung back. Her whole life in the last two days seemed to have been taken up with viewing dead bodies. At least she had not seen DeCamp's remains. The taste of bile rose in her throat. She hoped she would not embarrass herself by vomiting or passing out. For the first time she thought she had been a fool to come. Instead of being a comfort to Cate, she seemed to be the person Cate was anxious to vent some strange and unexplained wrath on.

As for Montague, even though he was her natural and legitimate father, she had seen him only twice in her life. The first time he had still possessed most of his faculties although they were greatly impaired by drink. The circumstances had been so tragic that she had no impression of him at all. His son George, her half-brother, had died violently and horribly. The macabre events had run together so that she retained nothing clearly except that he had mistaken her for her mother, his first wife.

The second time was mere days ago when he had been near death. She shuddered. The volcanic eyes had stared at her. She had had the awful feeling that he was trying to communicate. Perhaps he had been. Perhaps he had had secrets he wanted to impart. Now she would never know. So much happened in those few short days. She had met Rowdy MacPherson, and now her heart would never be whole again.

Cate dragged her down the hall and pushed her into a room at the front of the house. Icy air struck her in the face. She

began to shiver. The window had been left open to keep the room cold.

Cate turned on the gaslamp. "Here he is."

In the center of the room the body lay on a black-draped table in the fashion of the poor who could not afford coffins. A makeshift bier had been prepared by laying a door across the backs of two straight chairs. A black cloth had been draped over it and hung to the floor.

Duchess halted, unwilling to go farther, but Cate was inexorable. "Come on."

Montague had been dressed in a black suit that lay slackly over his emaciated frame. The death pallor of his face contrasted sharply with it. The skin had stretched tightly back over the cheekbones and the jaw. But the eyelids and mouth had been firmly closed. Unmistakable lines of suffering laid deep grooves in his forehead and alongside his mouth and nose.

"He looks pretty good, doesn't he?" Cate commented, lighting another cigarette off the first.

Duchess fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief and brought it to her nose. She decided she had seen enough of dead bodies to last her for a lifetime. The stench reminded her forcefully of the morgue. "Poor old man."

"I really don't feel sorry for him," Cate said bitterly, "and I don't see how you can either."

"He's dead," Duchess said softly. "He suffered before he died. I would feel sorry for anyone who lived the last six months as he did." Unable to look at the body any longer, she crossed to the window. She put her hand on the back of the empty Bath chair. A plaid rug lay folded on its seat. A heavy black belt was buckled around one arm. Duchess slid her fingers down across the leather.

"We had to strap him in it." Cate's voice cracked. "You remember. He couldn't sit up by himself. But we set him to facing the window where he could look out on the street. I suppose he liked it." She cleared her throat. Her voice turned sarcastic. "He never complained."

Duchess dropped the belt and thrust her hands beneath her cape. "That one time I saw him, I thought he was trying to say

something to me. You were never able to understand him, were you?"

"Never." Cate took a puff of the cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. The draft from the window caught it and whisked it away beneath the door like a specter fleeing Hell. "Never a word. You heard him. He'd bray like a jackass and mumble like an idiot, but I never could understand a word of it."

Duchess turned. Her head tilted to one side. She wondered how much Cate had tried to understand. She shuddered. How Montague had passed his last months was between Cate and her conscience.

Again the quick nervous puff and again the spectral flight. "Never," Cate repeated. "And he hated me." She lifted her head and tossed it defiantly. "Oh, how he hated me."

Cate gave the black material a tug and then smoothed it beside Montague's head. Her hands looked like talons with sharp-pointed nails as red as her mouth. Her face except for the bright red lips might have been sculpted from a slab of white marble. Kohl lined her dark eyes and turned the eyebrows into pointed bat-wings.

Duchess approached the distraught woman. "You can leave now," she whispered. "Cate, you can leave now. There's no need for you to stay here anymore. You're free."

Her sister swung around. "You're crazy. I can't leave here. Where would I go?"

"Cate." Duchess took the white hand that plucked at the black material. It was icy cold. She put both of hers around it to warm it. "Come away. You can come to me."

The taller girl jerked her hand away and took another pull at the cigarette. "I belong here. After all, this is my legacy."

"No!" It was Duchess's turn to grasp Cate's arm and pull her toward the door. "Let's leave this behind. He's dead. Whether you hated each other or not doesn't make any difference anymore. You've taken care of him in his last days and now it's over. He can't do either one of us any harm again. Let's use his money to make our lives better."

"You don't know. You don't know how it was. He never did

you any real harm," the woman in black accused. "He paid for your schools. You had a proper education . . ."

"I suppose you think proper means sent to a cold-water convent until I finally ran away. Oh, how I hated it there. I didn't even have a name. I was never addressed by anything but 'Child'."

"Better than a brothel," Cate sneered.

"I was here in this brothel with you until I was five. At least people were nice to you. At least you had a name and a mother. I had no one."

Cate laughed again, venom spewing from her mouth. "My mother was a whore. She sold me on my twelfth birthday for a hundred pounds. My father"—she stalked back to the bier—"probably collected ten pounds of it."

With a shake of her head, Duchess forced herself to look down at the corpse. "Forget it. It's over. Let it end here."

Side by side, they stood looking into the dead face of the man who had sired them both and cruelly rejected them both. Sisters with different mothers, but both bearing the unmistakable stamp of the dead man's best features—the dark eyes, the wealth of dark hair, the natural grace and clean lines of the very wellbred. Neither one was oblivious to the irony.

Lord Terence Montague, Member of Parliament, passed the last months of his life in a brothel of which he was a part owner. Lord Terence Montague, Knight of the Garter, lay on a crude bier draped with dyed-black muslim, rather than beneath the cloth of state.

"Now he's dead," Duchess said in a flat voice. "And we shouldn't allow him to make us suffer anymore."

Cate stood silent. For an instant Duchess thought she had broken through the wall that her sister hid behind. The expression softened. Then Cate laughed again and a demon looked out of her eyes. "No!"

Duchess sighed.

Cate stalked round the bier and stationed herself at the window. "Lady Montague has another twenty-four hours to collect him. Otherwise, I'm going to call the morticians to come and get him."

"Cate!"

Again the nervous puff from the cigarette. Cate assumed a defiant stance, fist on hip, head thrown back, points of eyebrows disappearing beneath the fishhook curls. "I hope she doesn't send for him. I hope he ends up in some potter's field."

Duchess shook her head. Something terrible had fastened on Cate's mind, but unless she chose to reveal it, Duchess could not help her. The very walls of the room seemed to ooze obdurate hatred. Montague should have been burning in hell for the crime he had committed against this woman.

Duchess tried one last time. "Cate. Sister. I'll wait for you. Come with me right now. Pack a few clothes, take your jewelry and cash if you want to, and come with me.

"What would you do with the likes of me?" Cate scoffed. "You're on a bloody allowance."

"Lady Clarice has given me everything. Everything that was Montague's. She's marrying a rich man and leaving the country. You've met him. He's her attorney, Bartholomew Falmouth. She's taking our little sisters with them to India. There's more than enough for the two of us."

Cate's eyes widened incredulously. She stalked back to the bier and addressed the corpse. "You didn't know that, did you? You didn't know we'd inherit everything. Of course, it wouldn't have happened if George were still alive. But George is dead. The precious son is dead. So we're both going to be rich on what you left us. Duchess will be on your country estate and I'll be looking after your interests in town." She put her hand on the corpse's shoulder. "Thank you, Father, for taking such good care of us."

"Cate, please."

Again Cate laughed. She stepped between the bier and Duchess. "I wanted you to see him. To see how well I'd done. And I did do well. You'll have to admit that. He hurt us. You and me. But me more than you." She shook her head. "But I did what was necessary for him.

"And before he died, I made sure he knew who was doing it to him and why. I told him every day and twice on Sundays. And I watched the hatred in his eyes and laughed as he brayed like a

jackass and croaked like a frog and slobbered and pissed all over himself."

Duchess covered her ears with her hands. "Don't."

"The only thing I really hated about the whole time was he couldn't swallow very well. He just kept getting thinner and thinner. Finally, his heart just stopped beating. Much too soon. Much too soon for me." She turned and pulled at the black cloth draping the corpse.

Duchess tried once more to pull Cate away. "Sister, come with me. Don't do this. Let it end here."

"Let me alone."

"No. You've shown me enough. I don't need to see any more."

For a moment the taller girl resisted. Then she shrugged. "I suppose you're right. It's cold in here. And it stinks."

Back in Cate's own room, Duchess pushed her sister onto the chaise. She poured another inch of brandy into her glass and handed it to her. Then she pulled the other chair up until their knees were touching. "Listen to me, Cate. Beyond these walls there's another world."

"If you've got money and position."

"We've got money. Montague's money. And England isn't the only country." The conversation was a repetition of the one they had had a few nights ago. Except now Duchess was advocating escape. "We could see new people, learn to do new things."

Cate sneered at the idea. "I know all the things I need to know right now. I've steady customers coming to me every night of the week. They pay me to do the most shocking things to their bodies. You can't imagine."

"I think I can," Duchess reminded her.

"That's right." Cate smiled like a cat. She relaxed back on the chaise longue and lifted her legs onto it. Crossing her feet at the ankles, she folded her arms above her head and leaned back. "My name is Hecate, you know."

"Yes, I know." Duchess stared at the transformation taking place before her very eyes. The fierce emotions disappeared

along with all their outward traces, the hectic color, the twitching of the hands, the nervous puffs from the cigarette.

"She was a witch, you know. And some say she was the Goddess of the Underworld. Never mind what you've heard about Persephone. Hecate was the real one. She was the judge of the Dead. Prytania. Invincible Queen." Her eyes were half closed, a smile exposed her teeth. Up close, the brown stains from the tobacco showed on the incisors.

Duchess closed her eyes.

Cate thrust her arms toward the ceiling and laid her head back against the chaise. Her words gradually became slurred. "Invincible Queen. Judge of the Dead." She looked at Duchess. "Listen to me. Sometimes she comes to lead the souls to Hell. Sometimes, she returns to earth to torment men."

Cate leaned forward earnestly. "That's what I'm here for. Don't you see? It was fate. Lady H named me Hecate. What does she know about Greek myths. She's never read a book in her life. But she named me Hecate. Doesn't that seem strange to you? I'm the Queen of the Dead. And here I'll stay in the Hell I've built for myself."

Duchess felt more helpless than she had ever felt before.

"I'm Hecate. Hell is where I belong."

"I'm sorry, Cate." Duchess rose and walked to the door. "You're upset now. And probably more than a little drunk. When you've calmed down, I'm coming back and try to talk sense into you."

Cate shook her head. "Duchess the rescuer. That's what they call you. Those little brats you rescue and those stupid farm girls. Duchess the rescuer."

The door opened suddenly.

Duchess had to step back out of the way. Cate blinked, then straightened. Hastily, she fumbled her skirt over her legs.

Charly ushered in Lady Clarice Montague. She was dressed in black, but the outfit was a walking suit that any woman might have worn at any time. A bunch of violets was pinned to her muff. "You poor girls," she said. "I never meant for you to have to go through this together. This is much more my responsibility."

She embraced Duchess, touching a warm cheek to her cheek. Then with admirable aplomb, she crossed to the chaise and bent over Cate to do the same.

"And you, my dear, are doing exactly as you should—reclining at your ease. You must be worn out from nursing Terence."

"Er—not so much. Everybody here lends a hand." Cate rose hurriedly and twitched the edges of the negligee together.

Duchess smiled at her effort and at Lady Clarice. "We were waiting for you to make the final decision."

"A private interment." Lady Clarice pressed her lips together firmly. "Very private. So private in fact that I have come with a mortician and a minister. If two of your men will help him, he'll take the body away and the minister can conduct the service on the way."

"Lady Clarice!" both girls exclaimed together.

She shook her head. "I know. It's not the thing to do perhaps, but I can't play the hypocrite and say I'm sorry he's dead. I'm not. Bartholomew is waiting and I want this over and done with."

Duchess put her arms around Clarice and hugged her. "Congratulations."

Clarice smiled a little wanly. "He has the papers for you to sign. I've already signed them. Everything is in readiness. Everything is yours."

"Lady Clarice," Duchess interrupted softly. "Cate is Montague's daughter too. She must have a portion."

"No." Cate protested. "You don't have to do anything for me. I'm illegitimate."

Lady Clarice's eyes flashed. "You most certainly shall have a portion. I consider that—"

They heard the thud of bootheels in the hall, the protest of masculine voices raised, shouting at each other. The door burst open again.

"My God." Cate burst into laughter. "It's the cowboy to the rescue again."

Rowdy MacPherson shot her a fulminating glance. Then he took two steps into the room, seized Duchess's hands, and

dropped down on one knee at her feet. "Evelyn, will you marry me and make me the happiest man in the world?"

Charly and another footman from downstairs skidded to a halt in the doorway in time to hear the question. Cate burst into delighted laughter. Duchess blushed scarlet.

The moment was electric.

Then Lady Clarice stepped in. Suppressing a smile, she portrayed the head of the aristocratic family for the last time. "Rise, sir. You may not ask Evelyn to marry you until you have asked my permission."

Rowdy looked at her, clearly puzzled. "Duchess?"

"Rowdy. You don't have to do this."

"Evelyn. I love you." He rose, his eyes locked with hers. "I want to marry you and I don't care about who . . ." He shot an uneasy glance at Cate. "I don't care about anything."

"But I care." Lady Clarice would not be denied. "I care a great deal. She is my daughter and a Montague and I will not have her marrying someone unsuitable."

"A Montague?" He tucked Duchess's hand through his arm, unwilling to let her go even with her standing in full sight of him.

"She is the lawful and legitimate daughter of the late Lord Terence Montague, Member of Parliament, Knight of the Garter—"

Rowdy gulped. He looked down at the lady standing at his side. What had Gill said about well-bred! He said a short prayer of thanksgiving to whatever gods might be listening that he had had the courage and the intelligence to pick up his gold.

"No. Wait," Duchess interrupted Lady Clarice's paean. "Before anyone says anything more, Randolph needs to know what I really am."

"Better let it slide, Sister," Cate advised out of the corner of her mouth.

"No." She drew away from him, putting the room between them. "Our father wanted a son. My mother, his first wife, had no children. So he turned to Cate's mother, who had already given him Cate. A girl. And he wanted a boy. He wanted one

so badly that . . ." She swallowed hard. She had lived with this for so long. The words stuck in her throat.

"You don't have to tell me a thing." He reached for her, but she backed away again.

"No. I do. You have to know. You may not want me. I'm the child nobody wanted. Both Montague's wife and Montague's mistress had babies at the same time. His wife had me, a girl; his mistress had a boy. So he switched us. My own father and mother gave me away." Her voice tightened and quivered. "They didn't even name me."

She looked at Cate. "At least you had a name."

"The boy, George, died tragically, last year," Lady Clarice said softly.

Duchess nodded. "So you see, Randolph. You were correct to worry about who you were taking home to your mother. What you're taking home is a throwaway. Unwanted. My own mother didn't want me. Even though she was illegitimate, Cate's mother wanted her."

"She wanted me to sell when I got old enough," Cate told Rowdy with a sardonic twist to her mouth.

"No one wanted me at all." Duchess lifted her chin. "So that's what you're getting when you ask me to marry you."

Rowdy looked at Duchess. "You mean you didn't even have a name."

"That's right. The second time my father saw me, he was dead drunk. He called me Evelyn because he thought I was his first wife, my mother. Mrs. Shires heard him and gave me that name. We decided to call me Evelyn Smythe since I wouldn't take his name."

"But now she can," Clarice said excitedly. "For a few days at least."

"Evelyn Montague," Rowdy said. He grinned. "Evelyn Montague. You're right about that. We'll change that quick as we can."

Lady Clarice spread her hands. "Now that we've rattled all the family skeletons for you, Mr. MacPherson, the rest is up to you."

"Ma'am." He cleared his throat. "My name's Randolph Mac-

Pherson. I'm a Texan from America. I'm the son of the MacPhersons of El Rincon, a Spanish land grant from the King of Spain in the eighteenth century. We've been in America for over a hundred years; but to tell you the truth, I'm not near good enough for her."

"Rowdy!"

"No, ma'am. I'm not. Back in my line I've got a Comanche warchief, a pirate, a grandee, a rancher, a wild-horse hunter. I've got a bounty hunter and a woman so mean they called her the Diamondback. And we've all done real well. But there are none of us pure or fine. Like she is. But I love her, and with your permission, I'll marry her and make it my life's work to see that she never wants for another thing as long as she lives."

Lady Clarice looked at Duchess, whose eyes were shining with joy. "I believe that will be sufficient, Mr. MacPherson."

"You may kiss the bride," Cate suggested.

He did so, very thoroughly.

He led her down the stairs of the Lord's Dream. Lady Clarice and Cate accompanied them. The gray gelding waited patiently at the curb, the Western saddle on its back.

Lady Clarice kissed her. "I'm so happy for you," she whispered.

Duchess turned to Cate. "Sister, please take the inheritance."

Cate shrugged. "I don't think so. I belong here." She kissed the air beside Duchess's cheek. "Good luck, sister."

Rowdy swung into the saddle and reached down. "Duchess. I'm going to carry you off."

"To Texas?" She put up her arms, a world of happiness shining in her eyes.

"To Texas!" He lifted her in front of him and put both arms around her. He slapped his reins on the gray's neck. "Step soft, old son."

People on the sidewalk were treated to the sight of the famous Texas cowboy kissing his lady as he rode through the streets of London.

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